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SIMPSON

# SIMPSON

BY

ELINOR MORDAUNT

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
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1913

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# DEDICATION

To all Simpsons — whether spelt with a "p" or without — this book is dedicated: though they, and others, are warned of the fact that it deals almost entirely with love, so that those who feel no interest in this great passion, which still "rules the camp, the court, the grove," are recommended to the study of Blue Books, or other printed matter of that description. For myself I have always loved love: made a fine art of the practice of it: delighted to write of it. Thus, in dedicating this book to all Simpsons, I dedicate it most particularly to those who are, or study to become, lovers.

ELINOR MORDAUNT.

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# SIMPSON

## PART I

# SIMPSON

## CHAPTER I

### SIMPSON ADVENTURES INTO THE OPEN COUNTRY

"WHICH way now?" enquired Simpson. For the moment the driver ceased to urge his horse forward; it had stopped, and stood puffing, with an exaggerated air of exhaustion, its fore legs stuck straight out in front of it; while the man had risen in his seat and was scanning the landscape; his stubbly underlip — for it was Wednesday, and he was in the weekly meridian between a beard and a clean shave — protruding, his eyes screwed up into mere shadowy slits, devoid of intelligence, beneath their penthouse of bushy brows and dilapidated hat brim.

At Simpson's question he took off his hat, examined it curiously, as though it belonged to some one else: wiped it out with his handkerchief: passed his sleeve across his brow, and scratched his head before replying, with drawling deliberation:—

"Well, you see, it 's this fashion. It may be tu th' right, then again it may be tu th' left: I 'm danged if I don't disremember. It 's a powerful time since I comed along this way; an' there were n't not no signposts in them days."

"But the signpost says nothing of Fountains Court," put in Finch rather impatiently: "it says to Market Charlford and Long Ilkley."

"But it sort o' gets me muddled up, for all that," replied the driver; then replaced his headgear, knotted his reins to the rail of the splashboard with an air of finality, took out his pipe and began to fill it, ramming home the tobacco with a stubby fourth finger.

"If I could mind me whether Fountains be on the road to Long Ilkley, or on the road to Charlford, well, there we 'ud be. But I was n't along there not more than once, at the burryin' o' the old lady; an' Mr. Thompson — that was Reannie's steward — was that free-handed with the liquor — lashin's an' leavin's there was, better nor any wedding — that I don't seem to have any clear recollection, so to speak, o' which way 's which. It seems to me, if I might make so bold, that, seein' as that things be as they be, the best plan 'ud be for you gentlemen to bide along here quietly till some 'un comes by as we can ask the way of. Better nor stavangering off, the Lord only knows where, up an' down them there danged hills."

"Seems to me as if we might wait till doomsday." Finch flung himself impatiently to his feet, a slim, nervous figure in his grey flannel suit; and turning round, stood with one foot on the seat of the ancient victoria. "Two Paradises were as one to dwell in Paradise alone," he quoted. "And barring your

august presence, Simpson, and that old reprobate on the box, it seems as if that's what is likely to happen. Did you ever see such slumberous, sleek beauty, and such solitude? All within thirty miles of London, too. I wonder who on earth ever treads the flowery way to Long Ilkley and Market Charlford, or are they mere figments of the imagination! But, by Jove, what colour! Did you ever see anything like that pinkish haze, where the trees are just coming into leaf, as though spring had touched them with rose-tipped fingers; and the breath of green across the larches. 'Trees, hills and dales'—but, hang it all, not so much as a chimney. And, 'pon my soul, I believe that present solitude, and the memory of past beers, have lulled our Jehu to sleep. Now, what are we to do? I'd sit here with all the joy in the world and make a sketch if I had my things with me; but I haven't—and meanwhile there's Fountains Court. Haven't you anything to suggest?—George!"

The name came with a vehement burst of impatience.

Very deliberately Simpson inserted two fingers in the pocket of the tan waistcoat which lay in such a calm and unwrinkled expanse across his broad person, and took out half a sovereign.

"Tails to the right, and heads to the left," he said. Tossed, caught the coin, and opened his hand.

"Heads—the road to Long Ilkley." He rose leisurely, and slipped out of his light overcoat.

"Come, Agar, we'll walk a mile or two anyhow, and see what happens."

"Leave the sleeping beauty to be overgrown with brambles and briars — right you are. Adios, Bacchus-cum-Morpheus." And he jumped out of the carriage, while Simpson leant forward and touched the driver on the arm.

"You 'll wait till we come back," he said, speaking very slowly and distinctly, as though to a child; then joined his companion, who had already started off down the deep-rutted lane which called itself the road to Long Ilkley.

The air was of an exquisite freshness and purity. The sky true spring blue; flecked with white clouds among which the wind rioted; so engrossed in its pastime that it left all else, save the very tops of the trees, unstirred.

Either side of the road were high banks, rank with the neutral-tinted grass of a past season; shot through and through with the brilliant green of a new growth: the glossy arrow-heads of lords-and-ladies; red and brown fungi; masses of wild hellebore; the vivid lances of oncoming bluebells; and here and there — where the red-brown soil had broken away leaving a comparatively clear space above a disintegrated mass of roots — a tiny milkwhite flower against a background of clear, pale green, trefoil-like leaves.

"Pretty stuff that," remarked Finch, pointing with his stick. "Something like what we expect our first loves to be, and never find them. Something like

Shelley, 'all exquisite,' don't you know. I'd like to paint a Virgin crowned with them, throned on a carpet of them; and, oddly enough, against an Italian background, an emblem of my sophisticated self, breaking through my poetic fancies. But, by Jove, things of that sort make a fellow feel like saying his prayers."

"Wood-sorrel," remarked Simpson placidly, and moved on; a stolid figure in his rather new tweeds, over which the aura of a black frock coat and top hat still seemed to hang.

Again Finch stared for a moment; then laughed: "'Pon my soul, George, you 're the most unexpected person I ever met. I enthuse about the stuff, but it might be a mangel-wurzel bloom for all I know; and out you come, pat, with wood-sorrel. It 's uncanny to find a person immersed in the ways of bulls and bears, trekking off in such an unexpected fashion — you might be a reincarnation of Sylvanius himself." And he glanced rather patronisingly, though with evident affection, at the unemotional figure of his friend.

The satire, though kindly enough, was obvious. Nothing could have been further removed from the popular ideal of the swart, lichen-crusted god of woods and forests than the prosperous stock-broker; already a little inclined to put on flesh — which accounted for the smooth perfection of his waistcoat; more than inclined to baldness, as was shown when he removed his hat and carried it in his hand; with

a square chin, and heavy jaw, whose Georgian outline was discounted by a certain austerity of the firm, straight mouth, and brilliancy of the rather small blue eyes, which were the one arresting feature of Simpson's face.

For the rest he had topped forty; had, so far, escaped matrimony by a protective instinct for perfection; cherishing beneath his matter-of-fact exterior an idealism which preferred loneliness to disillusion: the delicate perceptions of a young girl, combined with the shrewd good sense of a successful man of business.

They had reached the top of the hill by now; Simpson moving steadily forward; his companion veering from side to side of the road like a foraging dog — in search of new treasures, and peeps of landscape; climbing the banks, and focusing each fresh view from beneath his arched hands.

For a while the road ran level; then dipped suddenly. And there beneath them lay a village; a medley of red and grey roofs as tightly packed round the squat, square-towered church as a rustic posy; fringed with leafless elms, purple with buds; overhung by a cloud of cawing rooks and a mist of blue smoke; the pervading pastel-tints relieved only by the fluttering lines of washing which form an integral part of such a landscape.

"We can ask here," said Simpson.

"And, pray the Lord, get something to drink," added Finch piously: straight on the road at the

very thought, his fine, lean profile nosing forward like that of a greyhound.

The village proved itself as Long Ilkley. And in the very middle of it, alongside the stocks, a brave new signpost took up the legend afresh — "To Little Ilkley."

"How many more Ilkleys?" queried Finch. "A curiously uninspiring name; anyhow, here's a pub." And he turned in beneath the swinging Red Lion, with Simpson at his heels.

Over the beer and bread and cheese, they bored a slow trickle of information out of their host. Fountains Court was not "more nor half a mile, or maybe a mile — happen two." But there was a stile in the village itself, from which a short cut ran across the fields and through a hanger; intersecting the drive halfway, and saving the long walk round by the lodge.

"But the missus bain't not there," he added; and glanced at them curiously out of his moist little eyes.

"I know that," responded Simpson rather curtly.

But once started, the man's expression of slow thoughts was as difficult to stop as a leaky tap.

"Ain't been there, not nothing ter speak of, since the master died. No company, no nothing. I don't hold with such ways; the gentry has a duty 'wards the like o' we, the same as we 'ave a duty 'wards them; and it ain't not good for trade, neither. But there you are; these be queer stavangering days for womenfolk, there ain't no mistake about that, what

with breaking windows, an' what not. An' not a foot of weeds to 'er, the very first Sunday as she come ter church arter the burryin': just a bit o' a black veil to 'er chin. Weeds ain't what they was in my young days, nor widows neither, nor wives neither. Such goin's on there ain't not knowing t'other from which. 'A widow?' says I, askin' Mr. Thompson, as was the Reannies' butler, concerning a young madame as was staying at Fountains, six years back. 'A widow o' sorts,' says 'ee: 'though I 'm danged if I know whether it be grass or sod.' 'Grass or sod,' 'ee says, says 'ee. A rare 'un for 'is joke was Mr. Thompson. 'Grass or sod'! That's a good 'un — 'grass or sod'!" And the man smote his thigh, in appreciation of Mr. Thompson's oft-repeated witticism. "A good 'un that, a danged good 'un."

"We must be going." Simpson threw a half-crown on the table and nodded to the rosy-faced maid who had served them.

The innkeeper, roused from his trance of joyful memories, followed them to the door. "Maybe you 'd like a boy to go along with you to show you the way," he suggested.

"No."

"Maybe you thinkin' o' takin' Fountains Court. Me an' my ferther afore me, we served the housekeeper's room and 'all with beer for nigh on fifty years past; if you 'll excuse me mentioning it, sir; no offence meant, and none taken."

"That 's all right," said Simpson vaguely, and

moved on after Finch; while the proprietor of the Red Lion followed him with meditative eyes.

"A furriner, a danged furriner;" and he spat to show his contempt. "A furriner from Lunnon."

"A foreigner 's a chap as comes from France or India or such like," remarked the girl, who was fresh from a board school.

"Argufying with me — argufying with me, are you?" The innkeeper turned, and regarded her with cold scorn. "You as ain't never been further than Little Ilkley since you was hatched. Did you ever see a native of these 'ere parts as ever wore his leggins splayed out over his feet that fashion? You tell me now. I 've travelled a fairish bit in my time, an' I know what I know; an' if I says a thing, that 's enough. Now just you get them there dirty crocks out o' the way, and don't you waste your time argufying with yer betters. An' mind me! The next time I catch you winkin' at any o' my customers when I 'm tellin' 'em a story, I 'll clout yer 'ead for you."

"I did n't wink." The crimson of the girl's cheeks flooded into her neck and down over her bare arms.

"Well, yer did; 'cause I saw yer in the glass myself, an' what I sees I sees! It wur only ter that there long chap, an' 'ee did n't pay; so 'ee don't count, or else I 'd give yer what for, let me tell yer that, my girl. Winking at a male man, an' givin' me the lie ter my face when I talks of furriners! You 'll be wantin' the vote next — *you*, by gummy!"

## CHAPTER II

### SIMPSON FINDS THE ENCHANTED LAND AND FALLS UNDER THE SPELL OF FOUNTAINS

THE stile, and path, well worn to the width of two by Sunday sweethearts, was easy enough to find and follow: meandering leisurely along through undulating green fields — whose whole trend lay downwards — till they ended in a dry ditch and bank, starred with celandines, where it crossed an arching grass-grown bridge, crept under another stile, and led into a long narrow coppice; when, turning at right angles, it continued its way along the hollow; pointing off, at length, in a deep cleft between two broad sweeps of park land.

Climbing up out of this, in a straggling fashion — for the path had disappeared, and Finch was bearing to the high ground westward, in search of prospective sketches, while Simpson pressed on steadily due north — the two men caught sight of a winding riband of drive, accommodating itself to the far older trees; and beyond that a dense mass of evergreens, topped by a shimmer of foliage; from above which rose a wavering column of blue smoke.

"There 's the drive," said Simpson, and would have made for it, had not Finch laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Hang the drive! Let's get into the place from the side: surprise it asleep. There's a sort of half-hearted path, and I bet there's a gate, or a hole, or something. Come on, Simpson." And he was off, swinging along whistling; while the other man, after a moment's hesitation, followed his lead.

At first their way was deceptively easy; the thicket merging into a half shrubbery, half woodland, of scattered trees and undergrowth, at the far side of a stone wall, bolstered up with ivy and saplings till it had grown to be almost a hedge, though easy enough to negotiate.

But soon the place began to thicken. There was a rank undergrowth of wild hellebore and nettles; impassable laurels, and yews — things that bent back, then snapped viciously forward against their faces, beyond which they could scarcely see a yard — holly bushes, arbutus, and laurustinus.

Finch was the best off. Somehow he slid past it all. But Simpson, furiously annoyed and stolidly persistent, pounded through it.

"You're a damned fool, Finch!" he panted in gasps: "you artist chaps — always up to some damn fool tricks! If you let any more of those confounded things fly back in my face I'll — "

"Eureka!" Utterly regardless of the half-uttered threat, Finch had darted ahead; "An open place at last; we're through the worst of it. Oh, hang!"

"What the devil is it now?" The elder man was struggling with a fine growth of brambles, in painful

proximity to an overhanging barberry. "It can't be worse than this," he went on morosely. "Of all the fool games. Well, and *now* may I ask what you propose to do?"

He had broken free at last, to the detriment of his shiny brown gaiters, and stood by Finch's side, surveying that which had brought even him to a pause: a wide, deep-sunk fence topped by more laurels.

"One could jump. If only there was room to take off —" demurred Finch.

"If!"

"I — suppose we 'd better turn back."

"Back! through that? No, thank you, my friend!" And moving a step forward Simpson began to clamber down the steep, slippery bank.

"Look here, old fellow, you can't climb that thing," protested Finch, half hysterical with amusement. "You 're not — well, not that sort of figure, you know."

Simpson, deep in the hollow, lifted a crimson and outraged face. "Go to hell!" he said, stuck his fingers into a fissure in the ten-foot wall, and groped for a foothold; got it and swept his brown boot desperately round in search of another — while all the blood in his body seemed to gather to his fingertips; caught his toe in a crack — the merest crack, which needed a sharp kick before it would yield him sanctuary; found another, and then another — with agonizing intervals — clung with one boot waving wildly in mid air; then at last, only one moment

later than Finch, wriggled onto the strip of green turf at the top, where he lay for a space, breathing heavily. Then he rose and pushed his way, with a sort of desperation, right into the midst of a thick belt of laurels; pressed forward for a few steps; and once more broke into the open with a long-drawn "Oh!"

"I say, I hope —" Finch crashed through behind him; half apologetic, choking with laughter; then paused at his companion's side.

"By Jove, that's good!" he said, his head on one side, his eyes half closed to focus the scene before him.

For "Fountains Court" lay just beneath them. Finch had been right; they had caught her dreaming in the afternoon sunshine. Just breathing, as that one plume of smoke testified; infinitely peaceful, as though folded in a pleasant haze of memories.

It was a three-storeyed grey house, built in the shape of a hollow square, with abbreviated ends, of which each terminated in an eight-sided bay; the clustering chimneys also octagonal in shape, and curiously carved; the windows stone-mullioned; the pointed roof covered with stone tiles, all gold and green with lichen; while, in the very centre, flanked by long windows, was a wide arched porch and open door.

Evidently they had approached the house on the wrong side, for there was no sign of a drive: only a wide border, a narrow terrace; and below that a

straight flagged path; bordered by a prim garden with more flagged paths, — arranged in geometrical order round a grey sundial, — the interstices of which formed triangular flower-beds, gleaming in silvery grey foliage and punctuated by dark, primly cut dwarf yews and box bushes.

Below this, again, stretched an undulating lawn, dotted with trees deep in moss, roughening almost to pasture land where it joined the shrubbery; the whole ablaze with crocuses and pierced with the grey spikes of coming daffodils.

To the east of this lawn, there was a thickening of trees, and a glimpse of outbuildings which might have been stables. To the west a square walled garden, running out almost to the edge of the shrubbery.

Towards this Simpson made his way. "I'll be hanged if I'll cross that lawn, in full sight of all those windows," he declared; found a narrow path, pressed between the laurels and high grey wall, and followed it till he reached an arched doorway; pushed it open, and found himself in a maze of closely cut grass paths, bordered by pleached fruit trees, along which he moved, with a curious feeling as if he was reading a book, every word of which he knew by heart: going over some inevitable and oft-repeated plan of action; till he reached a round pond, surrounded by stone coping on which crouched a small boy, who, apparently conscious of wrongdoing, sprang to his feet the moment the two men ap-

peared; ran to the side of the garden; doubled as they advanced; hung for a moment, — with head thrust forward, and light eyes furtive as those of some small wild animal, — darted forward, and bolted out of the door by which they had entered.

"Poaching!" remarked Simpson dryly; advanced towards the pond, and lifting a palpitating gold-fish which lay upon the bank, dropped it back into its native element.

"I wonder why he bolted past us like that, instead of out at that door." And Finch jerked his head towards the opposite side of the garden.

"Leads to the house. There're people there, you know; 'MacCracken and MacCracken' told me: a housekeeper and gardener fellow." Simpson was surveying himself pensively in the water as he spoke. "I say, I can't go up to the house in this condition. No responsible person would trust me inside the door. Hang it all, if I know how you managed to wriggle through and keep as clean as that." And he gazed at his friend almost reproachfully.

"Oh, you're all right; only for the front of your waistcoat, where it reached the wall first," grinned Finch maliciously: "if you will understudy for a City Alderman, you know! But hold on a minute, while I brush you down; and there's a smudge of black on your nose from those beastly yews. There you are. Now, come along. Odd, I suppose this is as English as anything can be; but one could sketch it to look pure Japanese, with all these plums in bloom, and

those pale iris, and grey, velvety-leafed things. It 's all herbs, do you see, and seedlings, and violet-beds; no beastly cabbages or anything of that sort; — 'A garden is a winsome place, God wot.' "

"I shan't take the place unless it 's got a decent vegetable garden," declared Simpson; half ashamed of the spell Fountains had already cast upon him; fighting against the inevitable knowledge that he would take it, even if it were destitute of every necessity of civilization. For already it seemed his: quite inevitably his. He had come home. And, however much certain detached things might be wrong about it, the whole was right: part of himself.

With that almost uncanny perception which his artistic nature gave him, Finch realised this and laughed.

"That 's all bunkum. You 're in love! If ever I saw a man in love for the first time, it 's you, my dear George. And you 've got it badly, as we all do when we are past our first youth. You come here to escape from woman and all her works and fall in love with a place — an atmosphere, a temple of romance; grey walls and a garden: will wed the whole caboodle, as a nun weds Heaven."

"They don't," protested Simpson feebly.

"Well, they ought to, then. By Jove, how good it all smells, and what peace! I wonder if it would end by making one do all sorts of things that one ought n't — run away with one's neighbor's wife, for instance."

"The house does n't look up to much. Those gable things with three open sides 'ud be devilish cold in winter," said Simpson; arguing against his own feelings with the persistence of an obstinate child. Then he opened the door in the wall, opposite to that through which they entered; and, followed by Finch, wound his way among the flagged paths towards the front of the house; mounted the wide flight of shallow steps to the terrace, and became aware, for the first time, that a stout, elderly woman stood in the porch; staring at them, with one hand shading her eyes from the sun.

"Incarnate romance. Now, then, my gallant knight, forward and at her," laughed Finch; while Simpson — acutely conscious of his scratched and smeared condition, and their unconventional approach to the house — advanced towards the woman, who stood solidly at guard, with something of the aspect of a broadened and mature Minerva. An emblem of the old régime; too immensely superior even to show scorn of the new.

"Good afternoon," he said. "My name 's Simpson. I come from Messrs. MacCracken and MacCracken; perhaps you have heard from them."

"I heard that there was a gentleman likely to be coming about renting the place," she remarked stolidly, with a calmly appraising eye on both the men; her hands folded in front of her, making no attempt to move; till Simpson, feeling childishly small, produced the agents' card; when she moved a little on

one side, with a dignified obeisance, something between a royal bow and a cottager's curtsy.

"If you will please to come in, I will take you round the house; and then my husband will show you the stables and the policy. I'm expecting him home every minute. You must excuse my bringing you in this way: but the entrance, as you may know, is at the opposite side. This is only what we call the small hall; and don't do the place justice. This way, please; — and this is the drawing-room."

She flung open the door to the left as she spoke; then stood back, while Simpson and his companion entered.

The room was like a faded blonde beauty, who has outlived youth, and yet cannot bring herself to settle down to a comfortable old age. The walls were panelled in white, and painted — indifferently well — with meaningless cherubs and roses; the hangings were of old rose, the furniture French, of no very special date; the whole effect curiously depressing; while the very portraits on the walls, mostly pastels, — too old for freshness, too new for mellowness, — simpered down at them with an air of sickly vacuity.

For a moment or so the housekeeper hesitated, expectant of the praise that did not come; then moved to a door at the end of the room; opened it, entering first, and pulled up the blinds, letting in a blaze of sunshine.

"This was Mrs. Reannie's boudoir," she said. "They did n't use the drawing-room much, except there was company."

"By Jove, what a ripping room!" exclaimed Finch, while Simpson moved forward with a sudden warm sense of stepping into life.

It was one of the wing rooms, long and narrow; one entire end engrossed by the great window, hung in dull blue, and with a low seat, heaped with cushions in several shades of the same colour.

The walls were panelled in dark oak, and fitted, to the height of a man's shoulder, with book-shelves. The carpet was a deep indigo, several shades deeper than the curtains. But the chief charm of the room lay in the emptiness, the sense of space. For, apart from the books, there was little in it beyond a wide writing-table; two small, solidly carved Italian tables; two high-backed chairs covered in stamped brown-and-gold leather, which stood either side of the fireplace; and several deep arm-chairs, with loose damask covers of faded blues and blacks, showing an occasional touch of that wonderful pink which Perugini loved to paint: while above the high narrow mantel-shelf, set deep in the panelling, was the only picture in the room: a Virgin and Child, with a dark, curly-headed John the Baptist; the whole — in its blues and pinks and dull gold — focusing and gathering to itself, as it were, the entire colour of the room.

But yet, for all its charm, there was something missing: the only addition to which, as some instinct told Simpson, the room was accustomed; which would leave its peace and quiet dignity untouched, — for by no stretch of imagination could he envisage useless

ornament, or framed photographs; — and this was flowers. Flowers everywhere and a woman's presence: not a mob of women with a tinkle of teacups, such as he hated. But just one woman, as there was one picture.

Even the housekeeper seemed to realize a certain blank: something wanting. "There 's brocade underneath," she said; and lifting the corner of a loose cover, showed majenta damask, at the sight of which Finch drew his breath in a sharp hiss. "It seems a queer sort of room for a lady," she went on half apologetically: "but it looked better when the mistress had her flowers and such-like about. Now if you will follow me, gentlemen."

Once more she led the way through the regretfully decorous drawing-room — "Reminds me of those sort of women who are horribly aware that they 've done right at the sacrifice of everything which makes life worth living; and hate everybody else in consequence," whispered Finch.

"Have never wanted to do anything very much, you mean. It 's the very essence of negation," returned Simpson; and followed the housekeeper across the hall into another room, with a long massive table of Spanish chestnut and high-backed chairs, where more portraits, oils this time and of quite another calibre, — after a while Simpson grew to realise the little-used drawing-room as a mausoleum of feeble personalities and futile art, — looked down at them from the panelled walls: a lady in white

satin dress and floating blue scarf, with full, passionate lips, who might have been by Lely; grave-faced men in satin coats or armour; a young ensign in tight scarlet tunic, huge epaulets and shako; a fair girl with ringlets, the lap of her low-necked, white muslin dress filled with flowers; a stately turbaned beauty, stepping down a flight of terrace steps, which might have been those in the garden outside, a study of a woman's back, and beautiful neck, a few dark curls and the curve of a cheek, — all in creamy white and umbers, — half turning as though looking back at the upper windows of the house: the only light in the picture caught on the upturned chin and broad forehead beneath its mist of curls; and next to this a gallant boy with a pony; a judge in his robes; and yet others.

"The family," explained the housekeeper in a hushed tone, — afterwards Finch declared that she bent her knee at the word, — hesitated a moment or so in reverent silence; then opened a door at the farther end and ushered them into another room, corresponding to the boudoir; lined, up to within three feet of the ceiling, with books; with a wide-open fireplace and stone mantelpiece ornamented by carved coats of arms; deep, well-worn, leather-covered chairs, and two writing-tables.

"This is jolly, too! Pity it's the wrong light for a studio," commented Finch. "I say, Simpson, one might go farther and fare worse. It seems the very place we want — if I can only get hold of a room

with a north light. Plenty of space to get away from the other chaps; not to be everlastingly tumbling over each other," he went on, lounging round the room, with his hands in his pockets, peering at the books.

"Backing this there are the kitchens: and opposite them the billiard room: either side of the entrance hall, that is to say, where —" Here she stopped as if uncertain how to go on — by what means to gain the information she desired: satisfy, without loss of dignity, the curiosity which had obsessed her ever since their arrival.

Finch had come to a pause at the coat of arms above the mantelpiece, and was examining it critically, whistling softly, his long, loose figure bent forward; while Simpson stood at the window looking out at the prim old garden and the clump of budding chestnuts which bordered it at one side.

"It 's too big altogether, too much of a place. And un-get-atable," he said.

At these words the housekeeper's swelling curiosity burst. "That 's what beats me!" she exclaimed: — "how in the name of gracious goodness you did get here!"

With a laugh Finch turned, and swung backwards and forwards on his heels surveying her.

"At last! I was wondering how long you 'd take to ask that. What a relief to find you as human as the rest of us. Nay, more, all woman." And he smiled ingratiatingly.

"But —"

"'But me no buts.' We came in an aeroplane, if you must know. Dropped straight from the clouds to the walled garden. And now — now we're here we mean to stay, till a pantechnicon from Paradise removes us; lease the place to the crack o' doom: when all the dead Reannies rise and turn us out. Odd! that's what politicians are trying to do now: split up the properties, forestall the last day."

"You're talking nonsense, Finch," put in Simpson. "I have n't the faintest intention — " he began again: and then stopped. For the library window was open, and through it came a sudden whiff of perfume from a magnolia, already covered with creamy, cup-like blooms, which grew close against it; while at the same moment, pat as a song to a tune, there broke forth the shrill rapture of a blackbird's song, overflowing with the joy of a love and life which starts afresh each spring.

"Besides, the lease only runs for seven years," he went on, lamely enough; with a returning sense of the inevitability of it all. "And anyhow, it's impossible to settle anything now."

But, regardless of what he said, Finch, finger on lip, had leant forwards toward the housekeeper, who, like all women, was already warming towards him.

"Do you want to know how we really and truly came?" he said in a mysterious stage-whisper. "Don't tell. Never, on your honour, let him know you know. We broke in — wriggled through the shrubbery, crawled up the sunk fence. Look at his

wai— no, on second thought, I'll not give him away. It would n't be honourable; not the sort of thing a Reannie would do, would it, eh?"

"Don't be an ass, Finch. And now Mrs. — Mrs. —"

"Bliss is my name, sir."

"Tch — to think that I've split the combine — is *that* what you call it, Simpson? Before you knew — guessed how we came — it was ignorance and —"

"We'll see the rest of the house, and stables," went on Simpson, calmly ignoring Finch's feeble joke. "We've not got too much time. I want to catch the five-twenty to town."

"But sure to goodness you never walked all that way from the station, sir. Bliss shall put a horse in the trap an' drive —"

"No, we did n't walk." Suddenly the thought of the forgotten Jehu and his reluctant steed swept over both men, and they laughed. "We drove halfway, and left a cab and cabman somewhere a couple of miles the other side of Long Ilkley. He may be there still; but, if it's not putting you out, we'll get your husband to drive us as far as that, anyhow. I may tell you that I've practically determined to take the place, so I suppose it will be all right — Mrs. Reannie would not think I was being unwarrantably free with her property?"

"Indeed, no, sir. And if you'll allow me I'll get you some tea while Bliss shows you round. I believe that I heard his footstep a moment or so back."

## CHAPTER III

LILIAN FANE'S MOST PERSISTENT ENDEAVORS ARE PUT TO NOUGHT BY THE RISING OF A NEW STAR; AND THE PROSPECTIVE CLUB GAINS A NEW MEMBER

THAT night Simpson dressed for dinner at his club, where his man met him with his evening clothes; dressed in a hurry, for he knew he would be late and he hated explanations and apologies. Not that he was fearful of giving offence; for of the people he was dining with — Mrs. Cubitt and her niece Lilian Fane — the elder lady was too well drilled, and the younger too certain of herself, to show resentment at anything he did. Indeed, he found himself half wishing that he had been impossibly late; sufficiently so to have sent a wire from some distant station with the plea of uncertain trains. For he did not want to dine out at all; still less did he desire to escort the little party which Lilian had arranged so carefully — and for which he himself had taken a box — on to the theatre afterwards: then to supper, as he had been led into promising.

But somehow it had been inevitable, as it always did seem inevitable that he and Miss Fane should be involved in a series of petty engagements, every one

of which appeared as one link in an elaborate chain. Thus if it was lunch at her house, it was always pictures and tea, perhaps dinner afterwards, at his expense, for her and her friends: or, as now, the theatre and supper. Not that he minded the expense: it was the galling of the chain itself which he resented. Besides, they would be an empty-headed lot of people; Lilian's friends always were — Mrs. Cubitt did not count; she ebbed away, somehow quite naturally, with the last course — though once he had thought of them as a very "cheery lot." The evening stretched out before him in an endless perspective. He did not like the wine women chose for their dinners; or Lilian's playful airs of possession; or the way in which his tie persisted in behaving.

Fountains Court and that long ramble through the open country, even the very sense of difficulty, the struggle through that clean-smelling mass of greenery, had put him so out of tune for the ordinary routine of life that he was conscious of a desire — like that of a sentimental girl — to go home, and, sitting over the fire, think things over: re-live the past day, and picture the future.

The play was a musical comedy; something to do with "A Girl" — A Girl who fixed herself in no way whatever on Simpson's mind; which was vaguely detached from all that went on around him; only recalled in jerks when some sudden demand was made upon his attention, some question asked him.

Usually he liked such things. They distracted his

thoughts from business, without stirring up any of the depths which he dreaded. The representation of real loves left him, if they ended badly, with a premonition of what might happen to himself; or, if the wire-worked fates were propitious, with a vague sense of jealousy. But at a play where the emotions were clothed in pink silk tights and set to a catchy tune, he felt safe: could listen or not as he liked; with a free ear for Miss Fane's caressing contralto, and the perpetual sparring of the other two who completed the party — young Van Rennen and a Miss Netta Stringer, who appeared to regard personality as the very soul of wit.

"But what did you do there? Do you really seriously think of taking the place?" insisted Miss Fane.

Intending a mere apology for his lateness, Simpson had been drawn into an explanation, even before the soup was finished: and already the whole ground was arid with the way in which it had been padded over. Still, she had a way with her, — looked so sweet that it was difficult to rebuff her; though — in that spirit of almost savage criticism with which a man regards a woman he has once nearly married — Simpson had fully realised the irritating use she would make of her knowledge: dragging everything out into the light of day: admiring, questioning, yet receptive of nothing: casting back all his confidences with a sort of metallic tang, as if he had thrown them against a tin tray rather than a human heart: all this despite her calm perfection and soft voice. Even now

she could not drop the subject, which she must have realised that he had no wish to discuss.

"But do tell me," she went on: "it all sounds so interesting, so romantic. And Fountains Court — is n't it a darling name, Netta? And were they working?"

"Were what working?" asked Simpson, rather stupidly. Miss Stringer — quite regardless of the appeal to her judgment — had just demanded of Van Rennen why his mouth might be described as a perennial, and he found himself wondering vaguely what the answer could be.

"What? Why, the fountains, of course!"

"I don't know—I—I don't think there were any."

Suddenly a picture of the walled garden rose before him: the pool in the middle; the clump of pale-tinted iris and mauve anemones; the delicate reserve of the place; the air of the whole house, as if brooding over some plaintive memory; the realisation which it brought of everything passing and nothing mattering. Then, in sharp contrast, the warm living rapture of the blackbird's song outside the library window; and with it the sudden feeling that this was the sort of place where anything might happen; where one might dare really to live, fully and to the uttermost.

"Because it stretches from year to year — ear to ear —" screamed Miss Stringer, with a shrill delight that caused several heads in the stalls to be raised; half in protest, half in curiosity.

"But are you going to live in it all the time? What are you going to do there? You'll be bored to death all alone in the country," persisted Miss Fane.

"I shan't be alone."

"Oh!" The monosyllable was so archly significant, almost expectant, that Simpson was suddenly possessed by a savage determination to let her know the worst, get it all over at once.

"I'm going to found a Club there, a Bachelor's Club. It's going to be a sort of Sanctuary — a reserve. I'm going to get a lot of fellows together who don't want to marry — won't marry. We shall go there for holidays, week-ends: probably I shall live down there altogether, after a while. We shall have no women about the place at all; even men for servants. We must keep free of temptation, you know."

The feeble joke offered, half-heartedly, as a sop to Miss Fane's vanity, passed unnoticed.

"But shall you get enough members? Will it pay?" she enquired, with a curious sharpness in her voice: an indifference to all else which caused Simpson to realise the utter helplessness of his sex against such determined, hard softness; along with the fact that all his protestations of persistent celibacy had impressed her no whit: were merely waved aside as the passing whims of a child, out of which he might be easily coaxed or argued. Would it pay? That was the only part of it likely to concern her: affecting possible settlements.

And then, to his own astonishment, he began to talk rather wildly. "I don't care whether it pays or not. Of course it won't pay — unless we have hundreds of members, which I don't mean to have — except in peace and happiness, immunity." He felt he was becoming rude, but he could not help himself. "It will be cheaper in the end than wives and children; and governesses and nurses and divorce courts."

"And shall you never have any women there — may n't I even come to tea?" Lilian leant a little forward and gazed at him pleadingly out of her shallow grey eyes; showing no trace of resentment either in voice or expression; despite which a sudden feeling, as if he were some insect being systematically impaled upon a pin, goaded Simpson to fresh brutalities.

"We're going to have a dinner every year, when each man can ask one woman — unmarried — and over thirty," he announced; suddenly adopting a whimsical suggestion which Finch had made to him.

"Oh, *what* a pity ! I would so have loved to come," breathed Miss Fane regretfully: then added, "But, of course, rules like that are only made to be broken. Anyhow, how long do you suppose it will last? The idea is charming, of course, but —"

"I've taken the house on a lease of seven years, so it'll have to last. I don't want to make money over it; but I don't mean to lose. If any members fall from grace, they can easily be replaced."

"But yourself? Oh, of course, you could take your wife to live there; if" — and she smiled with a tolerant certainty — "if you do happen to change your mind."

"I shall never change it — not on that subject, at least," declared Simpson, in the boastful spirit of a man who is not quite sure of himself; and looking straight in front of him with an absolute determination not to meet Lilian Fane's ingratiating glance, became aware that the opposite box — before empty — was occupied by four people. A man and woman, of a world perhaps a little above his own; a bright-faced school-girl, leaning well forward across the front of the cushions; and, against the curtain nearest the stage, another woman, whose meditative eyes appeared to meet his, bringing with them a sudden fresh memory of the blackbird's song: a shamed sense of the vulgar banality of all he had been saying; so keen that he felt himself flush hotly before he realised that she did not even see him; observed the school-girl touch her on the arm and whisper excitedly; caught her kindly nod and smile, then saw her turn to the stage, with a sense of loss at being accorded the profile, in place of the full face and luminous dark eyes.

But even that was well worth looking at: the small, straight nose, the full, grave lips and rounded chin; the delicate pencilling of the brows; the long, slender neck with its gracious curve; and above all, the shape of the head, with its pale amber hair,

drawn back from the brows, loosed a little at the temples, and knotted loosely on the nape of the neck. Yet it was not only the woman's beauty — she was but five-and-twenty at the time, but no one ever thought of speaking of her as a girl — which drew Simpson. It was something more; something that the seemingly prosaic man felt to be native to himself: and — curiously enough — to Fountains Court; that brought back, with a rush, the high thrill in the blackbird's song; the scent of the magnolias outside the library window; the whole atmosphere of the place.

The chatter in his own box rattled on, like a charge of small shot: Lilian's account of a flying visit to the Riviera; of the people she had met there — never of the things she had seen: the silly stream of badinage; till one of Miss Stringer's witticisms splashed into a sudden pool of silence; and glancing up, Simpson realised that Miss Fane was leaning back, meeting the girl's glance with raised brows and an amused smile, behind Van Rennen's back.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said. And as the young fellow drew himself upright, blushing hotly, Simpson realised that he too had been watching the woman opposite; whom Miss Fane now began to dispose of as a colourless dowdy, accompanied by other colourless and dowdy people; who, as it was easy enough to see, were — "not in our set."

Fortunately for Van Rennen, however, just as Miss Stringer was starting on a fresh stream of per-

sonalities, the curtain went down for the last time; and there was a frantic bustle to get into coats and cloaks; every memory of what had passed lost in fevered anticipation of the next move, which was to be supper at the Carlton.

Only as Simpson stood aside to allow the ladies to pass did he find a moment to glance back, and perceive that the people in the opposite box were still standing quietly, waiting till the crowd should disperse; the fair-haired woman in the centre with both arms upraised to draw forward the blue cloak, which the young girl was placing over her shoulders, looking so straight in front of her that, for a moment, Simpson was certain their eyes met.

In the vestibule, and battling for taxis on the pavement, he found himself eagerly scanning the outcoming throng: fiercely resentful of Miss Fane's impatience to be gone. Even later his strained attention hung on each arrival, as though there were only one place in London to sup at, or supper an inevitable end to each day.

"I love dissipating!" said Miss Stringer, with whom the memory of Van Rennen's temporary absorption still rankled; — "I expect that pallid female in the opposite box has gone home to a glass of milk, Marie biscuits, and her prayers, long before this. We're really dreadfully wicked! But I love it, don't you? Who is it says — 'Be good and you may be happy, but you will have a terribly poor time of it'?"

"Netta! You're shocking Mr. Simpson." Miss

Fane spoke with smiling tolerance. She was sufficiently sure of herself to be free of the younger girl's petulant jealousy; so sure that George Simpson found himself longing to shake her: wondering if it would in the least disturb her perfectly coiffured head and well-corseted figure.

At last their appetites were satisfied. And, packing them into a taxi, Simpson was standing back to wave a last adieu — feeling devoutly thankful there were two of them, and no escort necessary; that he could at last call his soul his own — when young Van Rennen touched him on the shoulder.

"I say, it's still quite early; won't you come into my club and have a drink?"

"Not to-night, thanks. I've had a longish day, and still have some letters to see to. I dressed at my club, and have n't been home since I got back."

"Are you going to walk?"

"I don't know." Simpson spoke resentfully, overwhelmed by his desire for solitude; and for a moment the younger man hesitated, evidently aware of the rebuff, then leant forward, and laid his hand on his companion's arm.

"I say, do walk," he entreated boyishly: "and let me walk with you. I heard what you were telling Miss Fane about that old place, — what's its name? And what you were going to use it for. And, look here, I wish you'd let me become a member. It sounds ripping. It's — it's somehow just what I want."

"Oh, I — I don't know. I had an idea of older men, and you'd find us an awful lot of fogies. You're accustomed to such a deuce of a lot, you know, Van Rennen," protested Simpson.

He had only met the boy, who was the son of the very newest and gaudiest thing in millionaires, half a dozen times; and had always regarded him as a harmless gad-about, with the contempt that a man who has won his own place in the world feels for any one who is spoon-fed. The elder Van Rennens smelt of gold, and somehow he had always classed their son with them; never even dreamt of regarding him quite as a fellow-creature. Certainly he was the very last person Simpson would have thought of as likely to blend with the rest of the little circle he had pictured to himself. But, for all that, he turned, with the young fellow's hand still on his arm, and began to walk down Pall Mall.

"I'm really not so awfully young. I'm twenty-five in the mere matter of years," protested Van Rennen. "And in other things, ye gods! You see it's like this, Simpson. My people were already made when I was born. I never had the fun of finding out anything for myself; I was so be-nursed and be-governessed and be-tutored. Sometimes I watch the little brats in the gutter pretending that a soap-box is a motor; they're as happy as Larry. But I never got the chance of pretending anything. If I wanted a motor I got it, and lost all the fun of make-believe. I was never cold or hungry, or licked

by another chap — never got my back against the wall. I did n't ever go to a public school. My God, Simpson, just you picture that! Never went to a school of any sort: never washed in cold water: was never alone. All my life there 've been too many people round me to give me a chance of fun: every one of them with a scientific knowledge of 'the child mind,' as they call it; as though there was only one pattern made; — my very hot-water bottle wrapped in flannel for fear it should burn my little tootsies. And now life and women all offered me in the same be-swaddled fashion. As far as they 're concerned, I 'm a hand and a pocket — that 's all there is to me. Or — in a grade higher — settlements and a chequebook."

"I thought you liked women: you always seemed —"

"My dear man, I 've never *met* a woman! I hear the maids larking down in the kitchen; but when I meet them they 're mere black and white emblems of acquiescence. And then the girls in my own set; drilled and dressed out of all humanity; quite ready to dance to my piping: 'The son of that dreadful old Sir Abel Van Rennen, my dear. Ah, yes! dance with him as many times as you like: dance him to the altar rails if possible.' I know I 'm talking like a cad, Simpson; but I can't help it — it is true. What does marriage mean to that sort? A bishop and a dozen bridesmaids and cryptic sayings about the bearing of children, which of course they fully intend

to ignore, because it ruins the figure. And other women — fine pink and white flesh at so much a pound. I'm sick of it all! Good Lord, how sick I am of it all!"

"Why don't you butt in and do something?"

"And butt another fellow out of his billet. You simply can't imagine the wheels within wheels of the whole infernal thing. I think I'd go to the devil, only it seems such an obvious sort of thing to do."

"Why not go off shooting somewhere: South Africa or the Rockies or somewhere like that?"

"I don't know." They had walked through St. James's Park by now and were leaning over the rail of the bridge looking up towards Buckingham Palace, across the sheet of moonlit water and mist-swathed trees. "It would be very difficult to get away without taking the whole caboodle with me. Besides, to tell the truth," — here the boy gave rather a shamefaced laugh, — "I have a sort of feeling against killing things, against taking what one can never give. I even hate to see the way women hang themselves over with little heads and tails; detest the whole brutal paraphernalia of a rich man going big-game shooting. To take even risks; to shoot enough each day for each day's needs, that's a different thing. I've often thought — but I'm boring you frightfully."

"No, go on."

"Well, I've often thought I'd like to try my hand at exploring, if there's anything left. A couple

of men and a gun, and just what we could carry: sleep in the open, live hard — strip myself. That's why I'm in such a funk of tying myself up with a society woman. A squaw, that's what I'd like. A squaw would be the thing, Simpson. But the inevitable establishment, series of establishments — God forbid! Anyhow, I thought that if you'd let me join you fellows for a bit, I'd feel my way — perhaps worry out something."

"Try it on the dog," remarked his companion dryly.

"Well, you know what I mean: get my own feet: begin to grow. One gets so flounced round with women."

"Oh, I don't know —" In the silver wash of water flowing out from the black arch of the bridge Simpson seemed to catch sight of a pale profile against a dark velvet curtain. "It's no good being cynical — pretending one does not care. After all, it's that one wants too much — follows a star."

"But one wants a real star, not an electric light. Look here, — it's an odd thing, Simpson, — all sorts of society swells fawn round my people, take all they can get, and then sneer at them for being common — vulgar."

"My dear fellow —"

"They're quite right. They are common and vulgar. But they're something more. My mater plasters herself with jewels, dresses all wrongly, worships a title. But she married the governor

when he had nothing: washed and scrubbed and cooked: lost five kids before I was born. And now, if one looks deep enough, there's something between them that I want if ever I marry: something in her I've never found in any other woman. And, look here, Simpson, hang it all, but I want to wait, do without — or get it."

"Right you are." They were clear of the park by now and stood at the entrance of the block of flats where Simpson lived. "Will you come up? No? All right, suppose we say dinner at my club at eight to-morrow, and we'll talk things over. Good-night, Van Rennen."

"Good-night."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LEASE OF FOUNTAINS COURT IS OBTAINED AND THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN AGREED UPON

THE next evening Simpson and Van Rennen, Finch and another prospective member of the fraternity, Pierce Gale, — a young architect of consuming ambition, — discussed all the business aspects of the affair.

Simpson had that day seen the agents from whom he first heard of Fountains Court, and practically taken the place. Now there only remained certain forms to be drawn up and signed; and the approval of the owner — a widow of the name of Reannie — to be obtained, when possession might be entered into at any moment. "A cold-blooded sort of way of acquiring Heaven; with its heavenly immunity both from marrying and giving in marriage," as Finch declared; but for all that a very necessary formality.

Dinner over, they adjourned to Simpson's flat and pored over the plans of the house and garden. Gale's pale face flushed with ardour at the very touch of the paper. It was then that Van Rennen showed something of his father's capacity for business. He had money, and was willing to spend it.

But he possessed an instinct for order, for getting the best out of it: though he was quite unaware of the fact, and perfectly sincere in his deference to Simpson's opinions.

At first he wanted to be responsible for half the rent of the place. But his host could not bring himself to agree to this. Somehow he wanted to feel that Fountains Court was his: disliking the idea of part ownership almost as much as a man might dislike the idea of sharing a wife. And finally they compromised over an agreement that Van Rennen should pay all the outdoor expenses, gardeners, keepers, etc., and Simpson the rent; while the actual running of the house should, if possible, be met out of the subscriptions.

The little party had split in two. In front of Van Rennen and his host lay a sheet of blotting-paper, covered with figures, while at the centre table Finch — with a pencil, incessantly at work in his long fingers — sat discussing mullions and cornices, doorways, fireplaces, and possible additions in the way of bathrooms, with Gale, who leant forward under the full light of the hanging lamp, brooding over the plan.

To every one's surprise, he had, only a short time before, broken off a long-standing engagement with a very charming girl; for no particular reason, as far as any one could see. Though as Simpson glanced up and caught sight of his waxen features, and the deep black shadows in temple and cheek, he some-

how felt that he had been right; realised that the man's almost hectic excitement over, and interest in, the idea of the club, arose, not so much from the prospect of the thing itself, as the present relief it afforded from other thoughts; that he was in a state of mind and health when he did not dare to be idle, either mentally or physically.

A little after eleven the bell of the flat rang, and Simpson's servant ushered in another man in evening dress, dark and florid: superbly fed, and immaculately groomed, from the crown of his sleek black head to the tip of his polished nails.

"I've come to see about this idea of yours, Simpson," he began almost before he entered the room. "Have you seen the place; eh, what? Will it do? — eh?"

Simpson took the two fingers offered in a sort of aside: "Hello, Banks," he responded; "glad to see you. You know Van Rennen, don't you, and Finch — and let me introduce Mr. Gale — Mr. Banks."

Banks was already engrossing the hearth: engulfing them all by his size; uniting the divided party into a mere circle of colourless planets revolving round a fixed star.

"Is it any good? Have you taken the place? Is anything settled, — eh, what? And what about the rent, eh — who's responsible for that? And what about the lease, if the fools marry: eh, what? What will you do then, eh?"

"I've taken the place." Simpson touched the bell and ordered refreshment — which they had hitherto been too engrossed even to think of — for Banks's very presence suggested food and drink. "And as for the rent, there's nothing for you to be afraid of there. That's my affair."

"I'm not mean, old chap, — eh? you know that. I've got the stuff, and I know how to spend it. But I like to be sure how I stand. That's only sense — eh, what?"

"Well, it's like this. You become a member, and pay a couple of hundred a year, and use the place when you like; or pay a hundred and have a right to be there — either consecutively or at intervals — for three months each year."

"Oh, I'll pay the two — in advance if you like, Simpson. The idea's a damned good one — eh, what? What do you fellows say? One wants something of that kind — 'poor stricken deer' sort of business, don't you know." And he sighed heavily as he mixed a whiskey-and-soda.

"We're all going to be members; that speaks for itself," remarked Finch gravely.

"Yes, it's a fine notion — badly wanted; eh, what? Somewhere that a fellow can be safe. 'Pon my soul, I believe it was my idea first; was n't it, Simpson? Anyhow, I'm ready and willing to back you — it's just what we want. At least one place in the world where we'll be free from the eternal petticoat."

"There is only one condition," remarked Simpson gravely: — "you've got to join for the whole seven years. If you back out — fall from grace before that time — you pay the rest: for the remaining period of time, I mean; with a fine, to be strictly devoted to the benefit of the club, of five hundred pounds."

Simpson had been mending the fire; and as he straightened himself, behind Banks's imposing back, he caught the astonished glance of the other men and nodded; then smiled as he realised that they had leapt to his meaning.

"Eh, what? Oh, I say, Simpson, that's rather a facer." Banks crimsoned, as he turned toward his host. "Nineteen hundred pounds! That's a pretty tall order."

"Fourteen hundred — let's say: surely there's no need — particularly in your case, Banks — to consider that other five. And then the use of a fine country place whenever you like — no trouble of housekeeping, or anything."

"Unless you're seriously thinking of marrying shortly," put in Finch solemnly. "Of course, then it would be scarcely worth joining, and I'm sure Simpson would never think of holding you to any careless promise you may have given, before things were really fixed up. With us fellows it's all right. We've quite decided. We're the true bachelor breed. But really, Banks, I think you're right to hesitate. It seems to me that you're a different sort of bird altogether."

"Different — different, is it? By Jove, you fellows ought to know better! You, Finch, — and Simpson, and Van Rennen. Am I — I of all men — likely to make a fool of myself after what's happened? And, by God! you don't know all, or a fraction of it either: but I've learnt my lesson. All women are alike — liars; and who'd want to tie himself up for life with a professional liar, — unless he's been caught before he's old enough to know any better — fit to be out of his swaddling clothes! Tell you what, Simpson, I'll write you a cheque now" — and pulling a cheque-book out of his pocket he moved across to the writing-table — "for the whole fourteen if you like; perhaps that'll show you whether I'm in earnest or not. By God, to think of me — me of all men — marrying!"

"No; the first year's subscription will do; I'll trust you for the rest, Banks."

"And, by Jove, you may. Too old to be caught by chaff; once bit, twice shy — eh, what?"

"Or 'habit's second nature.' Every proverb has its contradiction."

"What's that — eh? What's that you say, Finch? Some confounded flippancy, I suppose. There you are, Simpson. And now when are we going to take possession? Drains and all that all right, eh? Not that anything matters much to me these days — typhoid — death — but one must think of other people: Christian country and all that — eh, what?"

"I'll see to that. We take possession a month from to-day, that's a Tuesday. And the first Saturday till Monday after I propose we all put in a week-end there."

"A little dinner — eh, what? Leave the wine to me, Simpson. I'll send it down from my own man: I may be made a fool of — too soft — over some things. But, by Jove, no one can ever say they've made a fool of me over wine. Well! I'll be toddling. I suppose you fellows will be sitting up half the night: but I must be off, home to bed. Got a big deal to put through to-morrow; must keep my head clear." And with a valedictory wave of his hand, he surged towards the door; reached it and turned.

"Not that I sleep when I get there. Never have slept anything to speak of since — you know what:" and he paused significantly. "A thing like that knocks the stuffing out of a man: shakes him to pieces. When I think of it — of all she said! But what's the good of boring you fellows with my troubles! You don't understand: nobody understands." And with another sigh he was gone, while a silence fell over the other men, broken, at the sound of the descending lift, by a shout of laughter.

"What is it, what's the joke?" demanded Gale, taking advantage of the first pause in their merriment.

"Love —" answered Finch, still laughing. "He was let down badly by a widow, nearly a year ago;

poor old Banks. And he's been nursing a grievance against women, a broken heart, — though I allow he does n't look like it, — ever since. But the fun of it all is that he's ripe for another fall — and we all know it: everlastingly trembling on the edge of a fresh affair: willing to lay his head upon any breast: oozing with sentiment. Heaven only knows how many times he's been in love since what he calls his 'great betrayal.' But he has a sort of shrewdness in spite of his folly; for he's somehow managed to escape being actually caught."

"It's more a sort of panic," put in Van Rennen. "He hops round the limed twig for all the world like a prosperous bullfinch; then suddenly gets scared, or is diverted by something else, flutters his little wings, and is gone."

"He's a good fellow for all that," put in Simpson. "He'd make a woman happy enough; be awfully good to her."

"The sort of woman whose whole ideal of happiness is three meals a day and an assured position," remarked Finch. "Well, I must be off. Are either of you fellows coming my way?"

"I'm going to take the underground from St. James's," answered Gale.

"And I," said Van Rennen, "am going to walk across the Park; we'll join forces — eh, Finch?"

For a few moments there was a bustle of departure. Then they were gone; and, turning out all the lights, excepting the cluster over his writing-

table, Simpson pulled forward his pad and started to write a letter; stopped after a moment and began absent-mindedly drawing little figures on the blotting-paper before him. Then — with a curious air of hesitation — he took his bunch of keys from his pockets, selected one, opened a drawer of the writing-table, and drew from it a tiny coloured replica — which might have been a postcard — of the supposed portrait of Beatrice d'Este; set, evidently by some amateur, in a wide black frame, such as was once used for old-fashioned daguerreotypes: laid it on the table before him, and pored over it intently, with his chin resting on his hand.

There was the long neck, with the gracious curve; the fair hair drawn back from the forehead, the straight profile, the clear limpid glance of the woman he had seen the night before: only the profile of the living woman was a little more mature; the mouth at once softer and firmer; the chin less girlish.

And yet the likeness was unmistakable, astounding! Simpson had seen the card in a shop window, only that afternoon: bought it and fitted it into an old frame: reminded, not only of that one woman, but — curiously enough — of that very different portrait of a fair girl in white muslin, on the wall of the dining-room at Fountains Court; though there the shape of the neck had been hidden, the brow shaded by a clustering mass of ringlets.

With a sudden movement of impatience he thrust the portrait back into the drawer, and locked it.

"Tch! I'm as bad as Banks, and with less excuse!" he exclaimed, and took up his pen again; though five minutes later he had once more laid it down, and was leaning forward across the table, idly dreaming.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CLUB IS INAUGURATED — AND INVADED

THE inaugural Saturday till Monday had passed; so had Tuesday and Wednesday, but the members of the Club still lingered: Banks, because he said he felt safe, and was planning out a miniature golf links in the park; Gale, because there were certain alterations going on in the house and he was terribly afraid of the character of the place being spoiled; Finch, because he liked to sketch or be lazy, as he liked: dress as he liked, do as he liked; Van Rennen, because he had brought down his motor, and found it accorded well with the simple life; and Simpson, for the reason that he honestly liked the place and was happy there.

Already three more members had joined: one a writer named Desmond, whose marriage had been broken off because the girl had objected to his having used their mutual love affair as the theme of his latest novel: drawing her — her weakness and strength, her likes and dislikes, her very walk and way of speaking, with fateful precision; adding to his sin by not only describing her as she was, but as she might, and as she knew she might, — and here lay the sting, — become under certain circumstances: a little

fidgety and over-particular: a little thin-blooded and austere.

"It's bad luck all round," he complained to Simpson. "For if I was n't able to do my job — see people as they are, fathom their thoughts, presuppose what they will be — I would n't be making enough to keep myself, let alone a possible family."

As it happened, on this particular day, when the little party was gathered under the chestnuts at tea, Desmond was up in town arranging for a fresh book with his publisher. But the other new members were present; a man named Kirkland, who had drifted about all over the world, tried his hand at everything in turn, and finally made friends with Simpson over some deal in rubber; and Gilbert Strang, a lawyer in Market Charlford, who had attended to some slight business matter for them, and in whom Banks discovered an old college acquaintance.

For once, May was acting up to her reputation; and even at five o'clock it was still warm under the chestnut tree, where the leaves had already burst, while stiff pyramids of buds promised a mass of bloom.

Fountains Court, too, was at its best. It was extraordinarily peaceful. The men had all been busied over one thing and another ever since lunch, — Van Rennen and Kirkland having devoted themselves to measuring out and marking the tennis court, —and were in that placid state of mind engendered by still weather and sunshine, a good digestion and a

clear conscience, when Simpson's man, who acted as butler, — Mrs. Bliss, retained as housekeeper and cook, being the one woman permitted within the precincts, — came down the terrace steps and along the lawn, bearing a silver salver, on which lay a card.

Simpson took it and read: "The Reverend Stephen Cartwright." Then he bent his head and sniffed. "The thing smells of violets."

"Merely the odour of sanctity, my dear George," put in Finch flippantly; but his remark passed unheeded.

"Why did n't you show him out here? Go and — No, wait; perhaps I 'd better go in. Where did you put him?"

"He 's on the doorstep, sir," replied Jervis suavely.

"What the devil do you mean? Don't you know better than that?" Simpson flushed as he rose to his feet: "He'll think we 're savages."

"Please, sir," — the man's eyes were on the turf. He hesitated a moment, then raised his hand to his mouth and coughed in a deprecating manner: "I did n't rightly know what to do. There 's — there 's a lady with him."

Finch laughed. "That accounts for the scent of violets. The lady keeps the Reverend's cards in her irreverend cardcase. We'll presume it's a wife or daughter — eh, Jervis?"

"Quite a young lady — daughter, I should say, sir."

"Hang it all! What are we to do! Some one must go out and explain. We can't start having women here, you know," and Simpson glanced round at the ring of unsympathetically grinning faces, with an air of growing annoyance. "I don't see why I should do it — You, Banks."

"Not I, my dear Simpson. What am I here for, except to escape from the whole breed — eh, what?"

"Well, you, Finch."

"Tell a woman she's not wanted! Not I, my friend. Besides, I might change my mind when I saw her. I can resist everything but temptation."

"Well, I suppose I must go. We can't keep the fellow on the doorstep much longer," grumbled Simpson; and was turning away, when Van Rennen sprang to his feet, and slipped his arm through his.

"I'll support you, come along. Of course they've got to be made to understand, once and for all," he said, and marched off valiantly in the direction of the house.

Before the front door, which even Jervis's loyalty to the Club had not permitted him to shut, stood a stout cleric; with such an air of being a personage that one's eyes involuntarily sought his nether limbs, anticipating gaiters. His hat was firmly on his head; his hand, with one fine ring, grasped his stick as though it had been a pastoral staff; while he was puffing out his cheeks and lips in a manner peculiar to middle-aged gentlemen in a state of huff.

It was evident that he expected the worst. His

duty as the rector of the parish necessitated his calling, but he did not like what he had heard. A stock-broker, holding irreligious, or at least anti-matrimonial views — along with seven devils worse than himself — were not the parishioners he would have chosen. Besides, apart from the question of morals, their social position constituted a difficulty.

The newcomers could not be regarded as quite on a par with the townsfolk of Market Charlford, seeing that they had sufficient means to rent "Fountains" — which was "a place" as distinct from a mere house: neither could they be classed with "the county." Very certainly they were not the sort of people upon whom he would have chosen to take his only daughter to call. But his daughter had insisted, and got her own way, as she usually did. Therefore his feelings of very natural resentment at being kept waiting on the doorstep, and his suspicions of the newcomers, were augmented by a sense of shamed irritation at his own weakness.

However, his face cleared at the sight of Simpson — who was nothing if not respectable-looking — and Van Rennen, in whose person a college education and sympathetic tailor had combined with an excellent physique in making him look like what Mr. Cartwright himself would have described as "some one."

Greetings were exchanged, and apologies offered. The two men were introduced to the daughter, evidently but just emerged from the schoolroom; a dark

girl with a white skin, powdered in freckles, a brilliant colour and bright dark eyes; and a few words passed, in the midst of which Simpson hesitated, crimsoning: for with laughing, challenging eyes full upon him Miss Cartwright had moved a step forward into the hall.

"I beg your pardon, but — but, you know, we've got a sort of club here —" he began, speaking slowly and rather pompously, as was his wont when at all embarrassed. "And, well — well, the fact is — we all realise that we're denying ourselves a great deal of pleasure — but ladies are not admitted. Except" — he added, remembering the annual dinner which he had mentioned to Miss Fane; and which had already been tabulated and arranged, with such complete disregard of the age question that no escape was possible — "except on very, very exceptional occasions."

"Oh, Julie does n't mind: Julie will wait," remarked Mr. Cartwright, disposing of his pretty daughter with that airy disregard men show for their own female belongings: though with a sort of frown, which told her she *must* wait and at the same time hung over her with anxious severity. For, as he afterwards confided to Simpson, Julie was too old to be whipped and too young to have any sense; and there was no knowing what she might do. On this occasion, however, he received an unexpectedly docile assent.

"Oh, don't mind me, Dad, I'll wait outside," she said, acting on her father's oft-repeated advice to

"answer up brightly when spoken to": smiled at him and Simpson, swept Van Rennen one glance from under her dark lashes; and sat down on the top step. "I'll be all right here, don't mind me," she added; her tone, to her father who knew her, sounding suspiciously meek.

Again Simpson hesitated, hating the sense of his own inhospitality. But Mr. Cartwright swept his way across the hall as though it had been his own: commenting on the charm of the place: his hosts' good fortune in securing it, and what the Bishop of Ilchester had said the last time *he* was at "Fountains."

His daughter, meanwhile, sat with her hands clasped round her knees, regarding the distant landscape in silence for a few moments. Then she took off her hat: patted down her hair at either side of her parting, which, as Van Rennen observed, was peculiarly fine and straight; and glanced up at him with an obviously assumed air of surprise.

"Oh, you're still there, are you?"

"I believe so," replied the young man, balancing himself on the parapet at the side of the steps. "I hope you have no objection," he continued airily, with a vivid memory of the "come hither" glance which he had encountered.

"Well, no; I suppose if I have no right in there" — and she jerked her head in the direction of the open door — "you have every right here. Life's very unfair for us women." And she sighed.

"I thought you meant —" began Van Rennen rather clumsily: then crimsoned, catching her appraising eye full on him, and suddenly conscious that no society woman he had ever known could surpass, in cool aplomb, this country girl of eighteen, with her badly fitting blouse and skirt, and thick, dusty shoes.

But at last the gaze grew so persistently minute — so devoid of any awkward restraint — that he became amused, then curious.

"Well?" he queried.

"I'm thinking what an odd way you do your hair," responded Miss Cartwright, without a moment's hesitation, and with the utmost candour. "It looks quite short. But it is n't really; it's just the way it's all smoothed back. Really it begins at your forehead and reaches right over your head to an inch and a half above your collar. If you were to give your head a great shake, it would fall all over your face, and reach to the second button of your waistcoat."

"Shall I do it?" volunteered Van Rennen; and the girl giggled delightedly.

"No, no, not now. Wait till I know you better. It will just do to prevent the horrid boring feeling that begins when one really gets to know people: be something to look forward to. Besides, I shall be better able to say what I think by then."

"Seems to me you 're saying pretty well what you think now."

"Pheugh! not half!" For a moment she drummed with her feet on the stone, leaning back, with her two hands, palm downwards, flat on the step behind her, while her face dimpled delightfully at the thought of what she *could* say if she liked. Then — as though suddenly remembering that she was grown-up — she sat stiffly erect, drawing her rather scanty skirts round her ankles.

"Seems an odd idea of yours, this 'Club': making up your mind not to do a thing that nobody's ever asked you to do."

"Well — not exactly asked, perhaps, but inferred."

"Really? That's taking things for granted; hinting, is n't it? I suppose that's a bad thing — an unforgivable thing — to do."

"Absolutely."

The girl heaved a sigh. "That's bad luck. I had been considering — of course, it was mere ignorance, and I should not think of doing it, now that I know better — that as I could hear the servants having tea in the kitchen — and am very thirsty —" she hesitated, the corners of her mouth drooping disconsolately.

Van Rennen jerked himself upright, with an expression of contrition. "What an ass I am! What on earth was I thinking of? I'll go and order some."

"Have you had yours?"

"Just started."

Miss Cartwright leant a little forward, tilting her plump brown chin interrogatively toward him.

"Let's both have tea — here on the step."

"You won't slip in, if I go and order it?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"Yes, promise."

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun."

Over the laden tea-tray, with which Mrs. Bliss provided them, the acquaintance ripened: chiefly by means of innumerable questions from Miss Cartwright, who wanted to know the names of all the members of the Club; everything they did, and everything connected with them: above all, the precise history of the unfortunate love affairs which, or so she inferred, had brought them to such a pass.

"But what do you call yourselves?" she demanded at last. "All fraternities like this have a name — any old name, like the 'Oddfellows,' for instance."

"Well, that's the difficulty. Somehow we can't hit on any name we all like. We thought of the 'Bachelors' Club.' But Desmond, you know —"

"Yes, yes, the one who writes."

"— said that some fellow had written a book called that, and it was piffle. But Desmond thinks very small beer of other fellows' books, unless the writers are dead. Shakespeare and chaps like that he does n't mind; it's all a question of royalties and best-sellers and things of that sort."

"Do you know what I call you?" Miss Cartwright leant forward and spoke in a mysterious whisper. "I call you the 'Never-Nevers.'"

"I say, that's a good name! That's a fine idea! I must tell Simpson about that. But, look here, how did you know about us at all? And if you knew about us: knew that — knew what — Well, knew what we were, why did you — ?" Van Rennen plunged, crimsoning at the sudden sense of his own rudeness.

But the girl's coolness remained undiminished.

"Why did I come, do you mean? Well — of course, that's why I did come."

For a moment the young man stared at her; then broke into a shout of laughter. "That's a good reason — you knew that trespassers were forbidden and so you trespassed."

"Exactly." Miss Cartwright pushed the tray on one side and rose. "It's getting cold sitting here; the sun's all at the other side of the house. What a waste of time marking the hours on the dial for those old fogies. And I know exactly what's in that garden now. Auriculas, and poppy-anemones, and daffodils, irises and alyssum. What do you do with yourselves all day? And who was the little tubby man with the nice eyes who came out to speak to Dad?"

"They're not in the least fogies, and the man with the nice eyes is Simpson, who founded the Club — leases this place, in fact. And — taking your questions in the inverse order — I've spent most of

my time, so far, in exploring the country in my motor."

"Have you a motor?" Miss Cartwright's air of temporary ennui was gone: she clasped her hands and leant forward gazing, with infinite envy, at Van Rennen, who lolled over the steps below her.

"Oh, I say, how ripping! I simply love motors, and there 's no one about here has them. What colour is it?"

"Dark buff," Van Rennen smiled at the obviously feminine question: "a Rolls Royce; not very much to look at, but good enough for these roads."

"I'd love to see it. Could we — ? Or is the garage also forbidden ground?"

"Of course, you can see it. I'd be only too delighted. Only I'm afraid you won't find the place very tidy: I had her out this morning, and I look after her altogether myself. It really makes all the difference — is twice the sport; and I get on all right: though she does n't look up to the mark just now."

But Miss Cartwright was not critical. She walked round the car, questioning and admiring: displaying an enthusiasm which made the young man feel mean at the thought of having taken motors — not merely one motor — as a necessity: an inevitable part of his life; touching it with her small brown fingers, in a way that was almost caressing; and finally persuading him to run it out into the stable-yard, so that she could see better; mounting it and

sitting in the seat beside the driver — "just to feel what it is like," as she said.

A sudden idea struck Van Rennen. "I say, could we — would you care for it — just up the drive and round a bit?"

The girl's eyes danced as she leapt to his thought. "Yes — do let's — do! Just for half an hour."

"Hold on a minute, and I'll run back to the house for a coat or something to put round you; it'll be cold when we meet the air," he said, and was off.

"I think I managed that very nicely," remarked Miss Cartwright, aloud, wrinkling her brow and sticking out her chin in a fashion which was eloquent of the most impish triumph, till, catching the eye of a grinning stable-helper, she drew herself upright with an assumption of dignified maturity.

A moment later when Van Rennen appeared, he had slipped into a greatcoat; and, regardless of personal rights, seized upon a promiscuous armful of rugs, including a regal fur-lined garment of Banks's, into which the girl snuggled with a sigh of contentment, rubbing her cheek caressingly up and down against the soft collar.

A little later, the Honourable and Reverend Cartwright — warmed and fed with tea and hot cakes, and comforted by a most excellent cigar — ambled through the house once more: dilating to Simpson, Finch, and Banks — both of the latter suddenly seized with a desire to speed the parting guest — upon the advantages they enjoyed: stopping every

moment or so to remark upon the beauty of the weather, the poverty of the parish, the excellence of the port wine at Fountains Court, during the old squire's time: till at last, reaching the front door, he paused, and stared: confronted by a flight of empty, crumb-strewn steps; a tea-tray, bearing the damning evidence of two cups, and nothing more.

"Well, I'm —" he began, and then paused, pushed his glasses up over his forehead; and started again. "Bless my soul! It — h'm! — it appears that the birds have flown. Also" — and he pointed with a stick to the two cups — "that certain members of your circle, Mr. Simpson, — adhering to little more than the letter of the law, — are by no means irrevocably averse to female society."

"They must be walking about somewhere," remarked Simpson feebly, scanning the empty sweep of drive and park.

"Perhaps, if I might suggest it, they have gone into the house. If you would be so kind — Mr. Simpson."

"It 's out of the question." Finch, standing squarely in the doorway at Banks's side, shook his head gravely. "It's against all the rules of the order. Van Rennen would n't dare; it's as much as his life is worth."

"It is n't a question of what your friend would dare," responded the cleric rather testily: "it's a question of what my daughter would dare. And, 'pon my word, I believe the very fact of a thing being

forbidden — the old Eve, you know. Perhaps one of you would be so good as to enquire."

"I'll go," volunteered Banks, and moved into the house; penetrated to the pantry, and there ascertained, from Jervis, that the stable-helper — then drinking his tea in the kitchen — had seen Mr. Van Rennen and a lady go off up the drive in a motor, not ten minutes — or it might be a quarter of an hour, or perchance half an hour — earlier.

"Tut, tut," remarked Mr. Cartwright, on being regaled with this news. "Doubtless our young friend has taken her home; she may have got cold waiting — "

"And an open motor, on a May evening, is so peculiarly adapted to warming any one," commented Finch flippantly.

But their visitor, who was drawing on his gloves, did not appear to notice this remark, though his face flushed.

"I suppose I'd better be getting on, too, Mr. — eh — Simpson. I feel I've paid you quite a visitation — h'm — quite a visitation. I shall hope to see you at church on Sunday. I suppose your — h'm — rather peculiar views do not interfere in any way with your religious observations."

"I should not allow them to do that," replied Simpson stolidly. Then, having shaken hands with his guest, he stood on the steps and watched his departure, accompanied by Banks who had suddenly volunteered as an escort.

"It's begun," exclaimed Finch tragically. "The Philistines are upon us! Look at poor old Charlie now, nosing off in the track of the first petticoat he's heard rustle for a week."

"I don't see what that's got to do with us," remarked Simpson rather stiffly: hesitated a moment, then moved off with some muttered excuse about having letters to write.

> "Oh, woman in our hours of ease,
> Uncertain, coy, and hard to please," —

Finch, left alone on the steps, soliloquised to the crescent moon, which already hung in the pinkish sky above Long Ilkley: paused a moment, and then continued the quotation to his own satisfaction: —

> " But once familiar with thy hated face,
> We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

## CHAPTER VI

### MR. BANKS FLUTTERS HIS WINGS FOR THE ADMIRATION OF MRS. STRANG AND HER TWO DAUGHTERS

"I SAY, old fellow, have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?" Simpson, intensely happy and at peace with his whole world, — including the boy who supplied him with barrowsful of manure from the stable-yard, — was on his hands and knees, planting out seedlings in one of those triangular little beds, between the forks of the flagged paths, which surrounded the sundial; in what Bliss — from sheer exuberance of fancy — was pleased to call "the Italian garden"; where the stones were deliciously warm, where the sun beat pleasantly upon his blue-shirted back; while he was conscious of a delightful sense of honest sweat — he had already forked and raked several beds — and complete well-being.

"There are to be dwarf white daisy things all round, and blue salvia things in the middle — a ripping blue," he said, sitting back on his heels, and smiling up placidly at his friend; completely oblivious of the question which had just been put to him, preoccupied with the delight of handling the fragile green things, the scent of the earth, and the anticipation of glories to come.

"Bless me! Do you mean to say that you've forgotten? For God's sake, don't sit there smiling like an overgrown cherub! Don't you remember that we're due at Strang's at half-past four. It's nearly that now." And Banks fumed as he pulled his watch from the pocket of the light waistcoat which focused the meridian of his immaculate apparel.

"Oh, I say, I'm not going over there on an afternoon like this. Get some one else to go — chuck it — anything."

"But you can't. You promised Strang yourself; besides, there're ladies."

"Oh, there're ladies, are there?"

"Well, what of that? One cannot behave like a brute because one — Well, anyhow, there's no need to wear one's heart on one's sleeve. Now, then, do hurry up, there's a good fellow."

"Take Van Rennen," suggested Simpson feebly.

"Van Rennen's out motoring; the Lord only knows where and with whom. It strikes me, Simpson, that young fellow will be forfeiting his five hundred before very long, if he's not careful what he's about."

"What's the good of fussing?" George Simpson leant forward and made a hole in the soft ground with his forefinger, dropped in a tiny salvia, and patted and pinched the soil round it with infinite care. "What does it matter so long as we're happy?"

"'Pon my word, you put me out of all patience! Squatting there on your haunches like a pig in its stye. For goodness' sake, get up, and go and get

washed and changed. They're putting the mare in the trap."

"I'll wash, and put on some clean boots." Very reluctantly Simpson called a boy and handed the precious seedlings over to his soulless care. "But I'm hanged if I'm going to change!" he went on, as he moved towards the house at Banks's side: "toff myself up to go and see people I don't care twopence about. They can take me as they find me, or go without," he grumbled; conscious that he liked the earthy smell of his rough brown suit; the knowledge that it had already shaken down to the shape of his figure; that the pockets had bagged with the golf-balls and cartridges, packets of seeds, knives, secateurs and other miscellaneous objects which had become part of his daily life; that the whole thing, during the two months which had passed since he climbed up the sunk fence and into the enchanted garden, had grown faded and weather-beaten, tufted by many a bramble and thorn.

However, in the end, out of deference to Banks's feelings, he did change into a dark blue suit; though, having made this concession, it was with an infinitely bad grace that he drew on his loose driving-gloves and mounted the high dog-cart at his companion's side. But his delight in the bay; her easy action; the quick toss of her head; the feel of her sensitive mouth, soon brought him to a better state of mind. As a boy he had loved horses; had never quite got away from them, even in his city life; and now

found one of his greatest delights in the few he had already gathered together at Fountains.

Indeed, in everything he touched, from the warm earth and small growing things to this vital creature between the shafts, he felt that he was renewing his early boyhood; spent on a lonely Yorkshire farm, where his parents had sat over the fire, evening after evening, talking of little else, save how they would send their boy to college and the name he would make for himself. Till — on the very eve of a long-planned visit to London to see him established as a young barrister in chambers of his own — his mother had died; while only a year later, his father, too proud to let even his son know how the loss and loneliness ate into his life, followed her.

It was all very long ago: nearly twenty years since his father died, getting on for thirty since he had actually lived in the country. But it was odd how it all came back to him, as the name of the wood-sorrel had done; the likely place for a peewit's nest; the flash of the moorhen's red garter; the way to call an owl, with a blade of grass taut between his two thumbs; the sort of bank a trout lies under; the very memory of its touch to small, tickling fingers; how to set a weasel snare, with a bent sapling and scrap of wire: somehow it all seemed so much nearer than the C.P.R.'s, Vallambrosas, Kaffirs, or Trunks, which had for so long been part of his everyday life.

Strang — who had come over to Fountains several times as a semi-attached member of the Club —

met them at his door, fronting flush with the street: directed them to a yard at the side, where a man took the horse; then showed them in. The entrance gave onto a small hall; very dark, very highly polished, smelling of beeswax and — more faintly — of cabbage: mainly furnished by a large round table in the centre; two or three glass cases containing a stuffed badger, a heron, and several indescribably mingled birds: a hatstand and two carved wooden chairs.

From the hall ran a panelled passage, straight to the back door, forming a dark funnel, at the farther end of which one caught a glimpse of a garden blazing with spring flowers, and rows of fruit trees; bringing with it an unexpected sense of space, and freedom from chimney-pots.

"They 're in the drawing-room," said Strang. Then adding, rather lamely, "They 're not very used to visitors; we are quiet people, as you know, Banks," he opened the first door to the left of the passage.

There were three women in the room, all of whom rose as the men entered; two of them laying down pieces of embroidery; the third, and eldest, carefully putting a marker in her book before placing it on a small ebony table at her side: though, for all this apparent busy-ness, it entered Simpson's head that they were not so greatly occupied after all: that they never had been, or would be, greatly occupied; merely considered it genteel not to appear over-anxious for their guests' arrival: the book itself being

— as he observed — a bound volume of Whitaker's Almanac.

"My mother," said Strang. And then: "my two sisters." As the three women bowed, Simpson was conscious of an extraordinary atmosphere of artificiality. It was not that they were pretentious or vulgar: merely that they were so well-trained that all their warm blood, all the spontaneity of youth, or genial mellowness of age, seemed to have evaporated; leaving them so like Everlasting Flowers that he half-fancied they would crackle if he touched them.

Mrs. Strang herself was one of those women with whom it was impossible to associate the idea of love or marriage; or the bearing of children. Indeed, it seemed easier to visualise Strang and his two sisters as having been propagated, in the fashion of certain lower forms of ocean life, merely by being broken off the dry parent stem, than as the outcome of any warm human passion; so merciless was Mrs. Strang's attitude towards any of her fellow-women who extracted good red wine in place of vinegar from life: who regarded even marriage as anything beyond a penance; a more or less necessary submission to the brute desires of man; the primitive decrees of a Divine schoolmaster; the price of her own natural, and perfectly proper, desire for an establishment.

Probably she had been very pretty when she was young: the colourless features were still well-formed: the grey eyes finely set. The daughters, too, might have boasted some good looks. And thinking of this

Simpson found himself wondering what age they could be; picturing them just as they then were, thirty years earlier, in short frocks and pig-tails.

And yet in a way there was a sort of charm about the whole family. The feeling that they would never fuss or make a scene: an austere restfulness, at one with the old-fashioned room, its faded water-colours, its spindle-legged chairs, and gipsy tables; the wool-work and beadwork; the elaborate silver tea-service and china — which delighted Banks, who had an unexpected taste for such things: all the cherished possessions of professional folk in a country town, where their forefathers have succeeded each other for generation upon generation.

They talked a little of politics; of the dreadful state of the country; of the "very common people" who had been "jumped up," as old Mrs. Strang called it: — "Members of Parliament were gentlemen in my young days," she declared.

From this they slipped into talking of the people round them: of the "County" — whose affairs were chronicled and histories known as though they had been royal personages; then, naturally enough, as it seemed, they spoke of Fountains Court.

"You have not seen your landlady, I think," remarked Mrs. Strang, with a sharp glance from under her bent brows.

"No, I settled all the business through the agent and Mrs. Reannie's lawyer. A lady does not care to be bothered by such things."

"You are quite right. It is much better not to know — in any case, not to be intimate with people you are in any way connected with in business. I am always telling Gilbert that, Mr. Simpson."

"We are none of us very likely to become intimate with Mrs. Reannie," retorted Strang, almost warmly for him.

"A bit stand-off, eh?" put in Banks.

"No — but she is different." Their host was standing leaning against the mantelpiece: his narrow-chested, high-shouldered figure, long face, narrow forehead, and colourless hair exactly duplicating the portrait of a rather older gentleman which hung above the mantelpiece; while at the same time he was so like his mother that Simpson came to the conclusion Mr. Strang, senior, must have married a cousin; though there was something far more gentle and likeable in Gilbert than there was in either his mother or elder sister. The younger was, after all, a little different: had more warmth, as he realised the next moment, when Mrs. Strang remarked that Mrs. Reannie was a "very peculiar person."

"Mrs. Reannie is lovely, quite lovely!" she retorted, jerking her head in the air, while her face flushed into sudden life; while Simpson — noting the glance which passed between her and her brother — recognised a bond of union between the two; an infinite regard for this Mrs. Reannie, as evident as the disapproval of the two elder women.

"It pleases Lydia to be romantic, Mr. Simpson. She forgets that it has gone out of fashion since her young days," observed the old lady, speaking with gentle precision; yet at the same time relegating both Lydia and her youth to limbo: — "Draw up the blinds, Gilbert, the sun has gone behind the trees."

As the three men stood waiting, while the groom harnessed the mare, Strang spoke again of Mrs. Reannie. "Fountains Court is her own place, you know. She lost her mother when she was quite a child, and a few years later her father — who made it a condition of his will that any one she married should take her name. The Reannies, as I dare say you know," he went on, with a simple man's belief in the absorbing nature of his own interests, "are one of the oldest families in the county. She married the day she came of age, not too happily I am afraid, a Mr. Watson Lee, who ran through the best part of her fortune before he died, some three years ago. I have a — a great respect for Mrs. Reannie: very trying circumstances — very trying."

The young lawyer spoke with a staid deliberation which seemed, at once, to relegate the owner of Fountains back to that mature age with which Simpson's imagination had credited her, and from which, for a moment or so, at the sound of the fervently uttered words — "Mrs. Reannie is lovely, quite lovely!" — she had seemed to spring.

Banks discussed the family at length on his way

home. "Nice women, those of Strang's — eh, what? Know where you are with women like that — no hankey-pankey tricks about *them*. Quite pretty, too, that youngest girl — or would be, decently dressed and with her hair frizzed out a bit. Odd they've never found any fellow to marry them. And the china! Did you notice that, Simpson? Fine old Lowestoft, and Chelsea, and all those cabinet things crammed with stuff."

"Can't say I was much struck." Simpson drew a deep breath of the sweet evening air; and shook the reins for the sheer delight of seeing the mare quiver, flash forward with a pretence of fright; then, drawing back, coquette with the long shadows which stretched across the road. "Look at all that wild parsley and ragged robin in the hedge. By Jove, the country's ripping now! Worth that old china and that old house and the old lady all put together; — family after family of lawyers they say, and it looks like it! Looks as if they had lived on parchment. Ugh! the place smelt like a mausoleum!"

"'Pon my word, Simpson, you've about as much taste as a bull calf. There were some fine things in that room: things that would fetch any amount at Christie's. The old lady's a tartar; but she's right to keep a tight hand on those girls of hers. If only more mothers 'ud do that, we would n't have women playing the deuce as they do with us men." And Banks sighed gustily.

"Oh, I don't know. One's got to let other people

live," returned Simpson vaguely; the whole attention, both of himself and the mare, being occupied by a motor, humming its way down a narrow lane, with high hedges, which debouched into the road a few yards farther on.

The next moment he drew the excited bay back upon her haunches, as, with a loud tooting, the motor dashed into the main road; ran up onto the wide grass margin at the opposite side, and down again with a bump; steadied and turned; then moved along in the same direction as that in which they were going.

"Van Rennen's car!" exclaimed both the men at once: and, in the moment that elapsed before it vanished in a cloud of dust, saw the young man turn and wave his hand; heard him shout, and realised that his usual place was occupied by a figure in a white blouse, while a dark, hatless head, with flying hair, pointed steadily forward above the wheel.

"A week ago, Van Rennen would n't even let *me* drive that precious motor of his," remarked Banks bitterly: "and now look!"

"That 's just what I can't do — confound this dust —"

"He 's in love with that girl — parson's daughter, too, — always the worst. The fool, the unutterable fool! In love, ye gods!"

"Oh, I don't know. Because a young fellow takes a girl out in his motor, it does n't mean —"

"Because he lets her drive. Do you imagine any

man in full possession of his senses would let any woman as much as touch the wheel; — eh, what? Tell me that, eh? By Jove, one would think after all he's seen of the miseries — But there, it seems as if every one must find out for himself. I dare say even Strang, that poor sheep Strang, has bought his experience. By Jove, but it's an awful world! To think how a fellow's whole life can be spoilt, his whole nature warped — If you don't push on a bit, Simpson, we'll never be back in time for dinner, and there's that salmon I brought down from town this morning; pity to have that spoilt — eh, what?"

"I was only waiting till the dust had settled down," replied Simpson, and shook the reins loose again, with a smile at his companion's sudden change of subject: the evident compensations which still remained to him.

## CHAPTER VII

### PATIENCE GOES UNREWARDED, THOUGH PERSISTENCE WINS MUCH

A WEEK later, Simpson, kept in Town by business, — fretted at the thought of the gathering beauties of Fountains, with only Van Rennen and Finch left to appreciate them, — found himself dining with Miss Fane and her aunt. Literally *found* himself; for that young lady had a method of playing him, of wording her invitations, and arranging his affairs, so that he was inevitably caught: with a shudder at the thought that some day she might, with equal success, set a more permanent net.

On this occasion there were no strangers present, and practically they were alone. For though Simpson managed to keep Mrs. Cubitt switched on to the conversation during the main part of the dinner, she might, as dessert came on, have been swept away with the crumbs, so completely did her niece — leaning forward with both arms on the table — disregard her presence; challenging the whole attention of their guest. After dinner she actually did disappear. And, as it was still only May and a cold, wet night, they had a fire, and sat over it, in what Simpson felt to be a position of dangerous intimacy.

As usual he was adroitly manœuvred onto the subject of the Club; towards which, with a woman's instinct against all that is likely to impugn her own prerogative, Miss Fane's attitude was more entirely natural than anything else about her; while her conviction that, once let any one of her sex — and class — get a footing there and the citadel was bound to fall, was evident.

"I want you to settle — really settle, now, tonight — about that dinner — Whom shall we have? You must let me help — you will, won't you? Men are so helpless in such matters, and it's no trouble to us women. There's Mr. Kirkland and Van Rennen; and Desmond and Finch — and who else, — oh, Mr. Banks, and Mr. Gale; and that Mr. Strang you told me of; and yourself — that's all, is n't it?"

Marvelling, both at her powers of extracting information and her precise memory, — and thinking how furious Van Rennen, who wished to have his whereabouts unknown, would be, — Simpson agreed that, so far, it was all.

"Well, that's eight: eight men and eight ladies. Oh, yes, and I want to bring Netta Stringer, too. Indeed, I almost promised her."

"You should n't have done that," answered Simpson, making a feeble effort to assert himself: to shake free from that intolerable feeling of being shifted about like a pawn on a chessboard: of being possessed: "you know every man's to ask one

woman — it was Finch's idea in the beginning: — they're all to ask whom they like. Then, you know, there was to be an age clause — to protect ourselves — a sort of close season."

"But, of course, we all knew that was only a joke — that you did n't mean to shut out all your *own* women friends. Now, as to Netta: I'm sure Van Rennen would like Netta to come. They 're almost — "

"I don't know — I don't fancy — " interposed Simpson hastily.

Miss Fane leant forward, with a glance almost of pleasure.

"You think — ? Poor Netta, she's awfully in love with that boy; any one can see that! Really it's sometimes made me quite uncomfortable. And you think that he's realised it? " — here she raised her brows interrogatively — "fled, in fact? Perhaps — I don't know what you men are up to down there — there may be another lady, a rustic flame."

"Oh, I don't know," said Simpson. He spoke rather vaguely, for, curiously enough, for the first time Miss Fane's words brought home to him the fact that the youngest member of the Club and Julie Cartwright really spent a good deal of time in each other's company; to judge from the fact that, during the last week, every one of the men seemed to have met them together in some place or other.

In a moment Miss Fane had nosed forward upon the scent.

"There is somebody! A farmer's daughter — a parson's daughter?" — and she literally clapped her hands.

Simpson's tell-tale expression was caught at. "It *is* a parson's daughter, the rector of the parish. What are you going to do? Shall you turn him out of the Club? What will old Sir Abel say? He wants the boy to marry a title; but I suppose he'll come round. And the Cartwrights *are* a good family; he's a brother of Lord Uxbridge, you know."

"What?" almost shouted Simpson.

"A brother of Lord Uxbridge. It 's a very old title, you know, but not much money. Still, Sir Abel 's got plenty of that."

"But how in the world did you know who is the parson at —" he hesitated, afraid of committing Van Rennen further.

But she was pat with the name.

"Little Ilkley? Why, of course, one does know such things," she remarked placidly. Then added — "Poor Netta! Well, anyhow, I would n't like her to be disappointed about the dinner: I could hardly motor down alone, could I? And really she has looked forward to it so much. There's Mr. Banks now; he would n't be likely to have any one else, would he? And it would prevent him feeling out of it: be a kindness to two people, don't you think so?"

"But the dinner was to have been an anniversary," protested Simpson.

"My dear man, you can't have an anniversary of

anything, unless you have something first for it to be an anniversary of. Every other yearly dinner will be an anniversary of this first dinner. Don't you see — oh, you clever business men!" And she shook her head smilingly. "How dense you are sometimes, over such simple things, too."

"But it was to be an anniversary of the opening — " began Simpson heavily.

"Duffer — duffer! is n't that just what I've said?" For a moment Miss Fane eyed him with tender toleration. Then bent forward and laid her hand upon his knee.

"You're not angry, are you? You don't think I'm taking too much upon myself? It's only that I want to help you. And that — yes, I'll confess it, I have been a perfect baby about this party of ours. I call it ours because we settled it together, did n't we now? But I'd rather give it up, rather do anything — than make you cross. You know that, don't you — George?"

She was almost tearful. In his subconscious mind Simpson was aware that the whole thing was as carefully arranged as the elaborate simplicity of her dark hair, with its manifold curls and wavings. But for all that, it was very becoming; so were the carefully shaded candles, the pose of her head, bent a little forward, with raised eyes. Her cheeks were so smooth, her lips so red. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to put out his hand and touch; — to take the fruit — so ripe, so freely offered.

Then, with a sudden sense of horror, Simpson realised all that it would mean. The inevitable engagement, which would be arranged for him; the wedding bells — all under an auctioneer's hammer; only in this case the possession would possess, the purchase annex the purchaser.

With a jerk he rose to his feet and glanced at the clock on the mantel-shelf. "What will Mrs. Cubitt say to my having kept you up so long! I had no idea how late it was. I suppose she has slipped off to bed."

"Yes," answered Miss Fane, rather blankly, and had half risen when an accident occurred which ultimately gave the Club a new member. For her long gold chain, set with amethysts, caught in the arm of her chair; and as she jerked back her head, broke with a snap and slipped to the floor.

Simpson, glad of any movement to break the sense of strain, picked it up, and bent over it; then examined it carefully beneath the lamp. "I say, I *am* sorry! Let me keep it and I'll get it mended for you. By Jove! it's a beautiful piece of work; I wonder if you know where it was got."

"It was made by a little man who has a workshop in Clifford's Inn — a man named Parrifleet. He's really an artist in such things, not like an ordinary jeweller."

Simpson took out his pocketbook, and noted the address; then folded the chain away in one of its pockets. "I'll get it done as soon as I can and send it

to you," he said: with that feeling of wanting to make amends, which puts a man so entirely at a clever woman's mercy.

In a moment Miss Fane had seized upon the advantage offered.

"There's no hurry, only I want it to wear at your dinner; the man who made it said it would bring luck. You'll let me help—if only to show that I'm forgiven, that you don't think me too horribly interfering."

"Interfering! It's awfully kind of you—to think of facing such a dinner — taking us in the rough. I'll ask Finch about it directly I get back, to-morrow evening," he said, almost effusive in his relief at having escaped any more permanent enthralment.

Miss Fane had moved over to her writing-table, and taken up her engagement-book.

"Next week's too soon, is n't it? — would scarcely give time to settle things. And the week after I'm going to the Blairs. But the week after that. Monday I'm engaged, and Wednesday and Thursday and Saturday. That leaves Tuesday and Friday — don't let's choose Friday; I'm superstitious, though you might n't think it. That brings us down to Tuesday, — Tuesday the 10th. There's nothing against Tuesday, is there?"

"Not so far as I know; only —"

"Well, let's say Tuesday."

And she put a mark against the date in the book;

then held out her hand, smiling charmingly. "And now, Mr. Simpson, I really must send you off. Do you know it's actually nearly twelve — what will Auntie say?"

## CHAPTER VIII

### A MYSTIC AND A NEW MEMBER

LILIAN FANE was able to wear the amethyst chain at the Club dinner; for, the very day after it was broken, Simpson — with a soft-hearted idea of doing all that he possibly could to make up, though for what he would not acknowledge even to himself — climbed the steep, winding staircase of number thirty-seven, Clifford's Inn, rounded and hollowed by the footsteps of many generations: knocked at a blackened oak door, and entered, stooping his head beneath the low beam.

The staircase had been dark, with a curious odour of age. But the room — which seemed to have changed its mind a dozen times during the building as to what shape it would take, and in the end been so elbowed by those adjoining it that the floor was bent to a hollow in the middle, the great black beams twisted and bent — was flooded with sunshine: flecking the whitewashed walls with patterns of gold and grey from the plane outside; glinting on the litter of bright metals which strewed the workman's table, set beneath the window, where a grey-bearded man sat working.

In the centre of the floor crouched a boy, blowing

at a little brazier with a pair of bellows: along one wall ran a long table, littered with books and drawings, and a flat glass case or two; while above it, secured by drawing-pins, hung a number of rough drawings of circles and triangles, constellations and astral bodies, presenting to the uninitiated an inexplicable jumble of lines, astrological symbols, names, and figures.

"Mr. Parrifleet?" queried Simpson, with a glance at the open address book in his hand; upon which the man at the table put down the work he was busied over — very gently and deliberately — pushed up his spectacles upon his forehead, and moved forward: a small, frail figure, in shirt-sleeves and white workman's apron, with deep-set, dark eyes, a fine parchment skin, and thick thatch of grey hair.

Taking the chain from Simpson he entered the name and address in a book, and promised it in a couple of days, — though, as he explained, the injury was complicated by the gold setting being torn away from several of the stones, — all with a businesslike precision which seemed more the result of habit than anything elsé, for his eyes were dreamy and his voice detached. Then he stood weighing the little chain loosely in one hand.

"I remember Miss Fane ordering it. It was a mistake. I told her so at the time; tried to dissuade her."

"Why?" Simpson, wandering rather aimlessly round the room, had paused in front of one of the

drawings — on which was written the mystic title of "The Twelve Houses"—representing six circles, carefully drawn in ink and coloured, dividing the equator into twelve equal parts, each named; the first, towards the east, "The House of Life"; the second, "The House of Wealth"; the third, "The House of Brethren"; the fourth, "The House of Parents"; and so on; each name pertaining to some such thing as honour, death, religion, or friendship.

"Why was it a mistake?" he asked, his head on one side, as he read the name of the last House, an amused smile on his good-natured face; for to his business mind it seemed an odd idea that any tradesman should discourage a customer from making a purchase. But how odd it all was! The intense quiet, broken only by the monotonous puff, puff, of the boy with the bellows: the dapple of leaf shadows on the wall, dancing irreverently over "The House of Life." One might have been miles away from London, generations removed from the twentieth century. The jeweller, having finished the business with Simpson, had again bent over his work; though there was no hint of wishing him gone in his manner; rather that indefinable air of making others feel at home, which is a gift with some people.

"Because the amethyst is not her stone, can neither give nor save," he said. "She was born between August the twenty-fourth and September the twenty-third, which period is under the sign Virgo, and should therefore wear sardonyx."

"Why?" reiterated Simpson, rather stupidly.

"Because the woman who has the sardonyx for her birth-stone is doomed to certain loneliness — loss of married happiness — if she neglects to wear it," he replied, in a matter-of-fact voice; while Simpson turned round and stared broadly, thinking the man must be mad; then saw the corners of his mouth lift to a smile.

"It struck me that Miss Fane might be in need of the good influence of just such a stone," he went on, his eyes twinkling. "But a wilful woman, you know. She would have amethyst; and here you see the chain already ruptured, with the stars only know what else besides." And laying down his pincers he picked up a tiny hammer; then — still with that air, not of disregarding Simpson, but of taking his presence as a matter of course — glanced across the room towards the boy.

"You can go now, Heinz; it's just on lunch time," he said. Then as the boy took his cap and left the room, he bent again over his work whistling softly to himself, while Simpson stood and watched him: a curiously incongruous figure in his well-fitting frock coat and patent leather boots, his shining top hat in his hand.

Realising the incongruity he grinned to himself. But somehow the place and its owner attracted him. He liked the feeling of being taken for granted; besides, he had sufficient of the workingman's blood in his veins to delight in seeing how things were made;

and for a while he stood in silence watching the deft fingers at their task. Then he enquired what was being done.

"It's a pendant; a love gift ordered for a lady who was born in the first half of May. You see, it's set with an emerald in platinum, engraved with the name Sarahiel, and the symbol of Gemini; the whole hung in a pentacle." The man was bent over his work; hammering down, one by one, the little claws which held the roughly cut jewel in place.

"Yes?" said Simpson, in a peculiarly quiet, interrogative way which was all his own, and which inevitably led on others to talk.

"There is a belief" — the words came in time to the tiny tiptap of the hammer — "almost as old as the world, coming down to us from the ancient Phœnicians, Egyptians, and Jews, that we each have a special stone, according to the day of our birth, which it is well for us to wear. There is one for each month — not as we count them, but according to the sun, and the zodiac. And one for each planet, and each day of the week; every one with its special power and meaning — the twelve jewels of the twelve foundations of New Jersusalem were chosen for this very reason. Some even assert that precious stones not only have the virtue and the power, but that they *are* virtue and power: individual 'egos,' the embodiment of the soul. So that — or so says Pythagoras — we each find a replica of our own subliminal self in some stone. Even Plato believed that they

held a personality that infused itself into the human beings who wore them."

"But what do you believe?"

"Who really knows what he believes? Though there is very little I would venture to disbelieve. For as Democritus has said, 'All things are full of gods.' But I know this" — he spoke with a curious matter-of-fact decision, his words broken to the steady tip-tap of his tiny hammer, — "Each of the seven great planetary hierarchies has its emblem on earth in some gem; through which each individual — attracted and swayed by some such astral body — may find help. One knows so little. Civilisation goes stuttering on with endless repetitions. But still things are proven. Look at the discovery of radium and its power. We are all keyed up to untold vibrations — impossible to see an end to the encounters which may influence us. There is that in our blood which corresponds to all in nature. Think of the irons alone — protoxide of iron and peroxide of iron — the two constituting the magnetic lodestone: of zinc and mercury, all acknowledged, even by the most conservative of medical men. Then think of the electric polarity of gems — the diamond, the garnet, and the amethyst, negative; the sapphire, positive; while the tourmaline is positive at one end and negative at the other. Do you wonder that — themselves swayed by the planets, the outcome of planetary rays — precious stones should sway us as they do?

"You know, of course," he went on, presupposing

a certain knowledge on Simpson's part; speaking as calmly as though he had been discussing Tariff Reform: "that there is an Anima Mundi — what modern scientists call a Luminiferous Ether — a mysterious emanation: permeating everything in nature; connecting all things. What Agrippa calls 'The Soul of the World.'"

But George Simpson's matter-of-fact mind was plodding far behind: — "I was born in August," he said, "the tenth or eleventh, 'pon my soul, I forget which! No one ever remembered it since my mother died."

"A ruby set in gold — engraved with the symbol of Leo." The words came slowly, for the jeweller had moved across the room and was at work with the bellows: all the nervous force of his frail body bent to the task.

"I'll blow," volunteered Simpson: "it will leave your hands free." And being accorded permission, he took off his coat, turned back his shirt-cuffs, and blew steadily while the encircling pentacle was soldered round the mounted gem; then hung over the table and watched a hole being bored, and a tiny ring inserted.

Rather reluctantly he resumed his coat, and dusted away the glittering filings of metal. "I'll come back in a day or so for the chain," he said.

"Oh, you need n't do that; I can send it," replied the jeweller; and Simpson thanked him, murmured a few commonplaces and moved to the door; then

hesitated and turned, with an expression like an embarrassed schoolboy.

"Supposing I was to have a charm, or something of that sort, with my special stone: I could n't wear a ruby ring, you know —" he began, and paused interrogatively.

"You might have a little charm for your watch-chain, quite inconspicuous — I believe you'd find it a help."

Simpson moved back to the table and began fingering the articles upon it. "Well — of course, I can't say I have much faith in such things. But what do you — you yourself believe that it would do for me?"

Parrifleet peered up at him with mild, short-sighted eyes. "The ruby brings love, power, and dignity to the man whose birth-stone it is; causes all obstacles to disappear from his path; inspires him with bravery and zeal."

"Oh," said Simpson. Then — being a business man to the bone — he added tersely, "How much?"

"The ruby is an expensive stone, but quite a small one would suffice. It might cost two pounds — if that would n't be too much? — Even more — but I would make it as cheaply as possible."

"Supposing we say five pounds. After all, that's not much for having one's path in life made clear."

"I could do you something good for that: really good," the little man flushed with excitement and zeal. "See here, we'll have the ruby hung clear in a

triangle, lettered round with the three syllables of the mystic name of Seratiel." And drawing a scrap of paper towards him, he began sketching a design, with a quick nervous touch.

"All right, go ahead. They'll chaff my life out of me if they ever find it — but let's hope they don't," added Simpson devoutly. "Well, good-morning, Mr. Parrifleet."

"Good-morning," said the jeweller, without raising his head: aflame with the ardour of a new idea.

"I'll come again — call for it."

"Say this day week." Parrifleet straightened himself; and moving across to a pile of dusty papers, which lay on the shelf, began turning them over with an abstracted air. "When did you say you were born?"

"In August, the tenth or eleventh."

"Ah, you don't know which? That's a pity! It would make all the difference. But —" his face brightened: "perhaps you can tell me the hour."

"Lord, no!" protested Simpson, crimsoning. "You could n't expect me to remember a thing like that."

"I suppose not — but it's a disgrace that, in these days, no entry should be kept of such things. However, I'll do the best I can, the very best. Because," — here he turned his limpid childish gaze full on Simpson, — "because I like you. You don't quite believe — yet. But you don't laugh. There's been some fine things said about that — very fine things:

— 'The crackling of thorns under a pot,' and — 'the loud laugh that shows the empty mind.' In a week, then."

The little old man seemed so vague, so cobwebby and unreal that Simpson scarcely expected to find the charm ready when he called a fortnight later. But there it was, delicately and exquisitely finished.

"It's been waiting a week for you," said the jeweller. "Miss Fane's chain? Oh, yes, it was returned to her long ago. Now, I'm only waiting for it to come back again," he added with a sly smile.

"Of course, he's a fool, with all those mad ideas about stars and all that," said Simpson, in telling Desmond of his new acquaintance: "but there's something about him —"

"Of course, there *is* something about him," reported Desmond, who — fired by the idea of copy — went himself to interview Parrifleet: returning with the shamefaced confession that he also had ordered a charm. "The fact is he's that rare bird, a wise fool; a whimsical new-born, with all the wisdom of the ages. He ought to join the Club: we want a few additions like that; something different. There's nothing to be got out of any of you fellows. Sound him about it, Simmy."

"An ordinary workman!" protested Banks; found his way to Clifford's Inn, swelling with outraged pride and curiosity; and returned to declare Parrifleet as being "*The* most *extraordinary* person! 'Pon my soul, the things he told me!"

Outspread in front of the empty hearth in the library, he puffed out his cheeks with an air of portentous importance: "The way he grasped all the details of my case; my peculiar sensitiveness. Of course, I was able to tell him the day I was born; the very time, — almost to a minute."

"Just the sort of thing that you would know, Charley," put in Finch.

"'Pon my soul, we must have been talking for an hour," continued Banks, disregarding the interruption, for it was never wise to cross swords with Finch; "then went out and had lunch together. He's a good fellow — a doocid interesting fellow, and all that — but if you value your digestions, don't you chaps be induced to grub at any of his pet haunts. Took me to a place with sort of texts hung round — not out of the Bible, you know; might have been Shakespeare — and all kinds of queer-looking people with long hair; looked as if they wanted tubbing. And the food. By God, you would n't believe what it was like. No wonder that poor little chap Parrifleet looks like a sick mouse! He'd some high-sounding name for it, too. What was it — eh, what? Oh, I remember! 'The Pythagorean Diet.' The Pythagorean Diet! There's a title for you! And all for what? Messes of eggs and green stuff — muck, I call it — muck! Not so much as a chop in the place. What do you think of that now — eh, what?" His voice rose to an aggrieved bellow.

"I asked for a loin chop — a plain grilled chop —

and they said they could give me a nut cutlet — me — me! By Jove, I can tell you that the stuff turned me queer for days. Regularly squiffy: went to see Maclaren about it — paid two guineas — felt as if I'd been blown out with a bicycle pump. Have Parrifleet here if you like, Simpson; I wash my hands of the whole affair. But, by God! if I find him interfering with the grub —"

The end of this speech was lost, both from want of breath and words adequate to the expression of his feelings. But, though the thought of what Finch termed his "ensilage meal" possessed Banks for weeks, he yet visited Parrifleet again and again; was seen sporting a charm of beryl, set in gold and engraved with a frog, — which by some circuitous means Finch ascertained to be a love talisman, — and quoted his new acquaintance's doctrines with ever increasing awe.

"He's a humbug," maintained Finch. "I know those spiritual sort of Johnnies. Ten to one he lives on gin, and has dozens of wives — murdered, buried in cellars — or all alive at once." And in this attitude he persisted; until several weeks later Parrifleet, having starved his body and overridden his soul, was brought down to Fountains Court — looking really very like a sick mouse — by Simpson, who fitted up a quaint, octagonal, stone kiosk in the park as the little man's workshop: and formally initiated Parrifleet as an honorary member of the Club.

Then, of course, even Finch was won over. Any

one might laugh at Parrifleet's gentle absurdities, or at his quaint and whimsical wit. But it would have been a very dense or very base-minded man who failed to realise his limpid honesty, the force of his ecstatic beliefs.

## CHAPTER IX

### ALARMS AND EXCURSIONS

THREE days before the date fixed for the dinner party Miss Fane swept down upon Fountains in her motor, accompanied by Netta Stringer. As it happened they arrived when the whole party were out, and were successfully kept at bay: first by Jervis, and then by the housekeeper, whom he called in to support him. What actually transpired after this Simpson never knew. But he gathered that Miss Fane had accused Mrs. Bliss of belonging to the forbidden sex, and received the stolid reply that she was "merely a servant"; that later a threat had been made of acquainting him with her "insolence," on which the intruder had been informed that Mr. Simpson was far too fair a gentleman to find fault with her for obeying orders. For the rest, he could well imagine the almost regal manner in which Mrs. Bliss would square her shoulders, smooth down her apron, and banish every scrap of expression from her face.

Anyhow, when Simpson did return to the house accompanied by Kirkland, with whom he had spent the day fishing, — both of them hot, dirty, and caring for nothing but the prospect of a bath and dinner, — he found Jervis on guard, Mrs. Bliss hov-

ering in the hall; and two decidedly cross young women still waiting at the door in their motor.

There was something perilously approaching a scene, so distinct was the acid note at the back of Miss Fane's raillery. But Simpson, backed by Kirkland's cool contempt, and buoyed up by the sense of being on his own ground, stood unexpectedly firm. The servants had only done their duty: their orders were very strict. It was as eminently a man's club as any in Pall Mall. But they would have brought tea out in a moment, — the loss of this meal apparently being the crowning grievance, — should have offered to do so in fact.

Miss Stringer laughed rather hysterically: "Out here, on the steps with the dogs! I can't congratulate you on your hospitality, Mr. Simpson. Come along, Lilian, I vote we get back to Town — it's very evident that we're not wanted here. We can have dinner somewhere on the way up."

But Miss Fane, who had found time to pull herself together, was too astute to spoil her chances by indulging in a fit of the sulks. There were men who could be got round that way. But, as she often declared, once having reached the age of forty they valued nothing so much as a sweet temper, and the prospects of peace, should they venture to embark on married life; though pets and tantrums might be, and often were, effective in the management of mere boys.

"We really did n't mean to bombard you in

this way, Mr. Simpson," she said, leaning forward towards him and speaking very sweetly; "only to stop and ask if there was any place — country inn or anything like that — near here where we could put up. It seemed to be getting unbearably noisy and hot in Town, and I've been having a series of stupid headaches. So Netta and I made up our minds we would run off together. Then, just in time, we remembered your dinner party, and thought we might as well be somewhere in this neighbourhood — that you were sure to be able to tell of some place.

"You don't mind?" she went on pleadingly. "It seemed such a sensible idea — and I thought that possibly we might be of some use."

"That's all right. I'm very glad to see you; it will be charming to have such neighbours." Simpson lied with slow deliberation. "The worst of it is that I'm afraid there's nowhere quite near. There's a place at Long Ilkley, but it's a mere pub."

"There's a decent hotel at Market Charlford," put in Kirkland adroitly, suddenly remembering that it was twice the distance from Fountains Court. "I believe you will be all right there. But surely you did n't drive yourselves down?"

"Oh, no, Barker's in the kitchen, having his tea, I believe," replied Miss Fane rather grimly. "Perhaps some one would call him for me. No, thanks, we won't have tea now. Indeed, Mr. Simpson, — it must be nearly dinner-time." For a moment she paused, leaning pensively — almost hungrily — over

the edge of the car; and gazing up at Simpson, who showed no signs of taking the hint.

"Do you remember our last dinner, I wonder —"

"I remember many dinners — hope to remember many more." Simpson spoke placidly, but with averted eyes, for he had no intention of being played twice with the same fly. Then turning, almost too swiftly, towards the chauffeur who followed Kirkland from the house — still chewing — he began to give him concise instructions as to how he might reach the little market town: instructions which permitted of no mistake.

At last it seemed that all was over. He was actually shaking hands, murmuring something about feeling "terribly inhospitable": his thoughts engaged with the prospect of a hot bath and a change, dinner and a cigar. "We don't — we're obliged to — you see, we've made the rules," he heard himself declaring vaguely.

"And, of course, the rules one makes one's self are the ones that never can be broken," put in Kirkland; both men rendered almost ardent by the fact that release was so imminent.

"Must keep out of temptation, you know," babbled Simpson, merely to kill time, while Barker got the motor started. "Must deny ourselves the pleasure —" he was going on; when he was interrupted by the sound of a violent slamming of doors; a peal of laughter; the rush of footsteps across the hall: more slamming of doors in a perfect crescendo;

echoing along the west wing of the house: up the stairs, through every room, then downstairs again;

Suddenly Miss Stringer gave an exclamation of surprise.

"There's Mr. Van Rennen," she cried. "What —" she began again; then stopped and stared; while a silence fell on the little group gathered at the bottom of the steps, their whole attention riveted upon Van Rennen; who, with an air of extraordinary caution, backed towards the entrance; and, pressing himself between the inner and outer doors, drew the folds of a curtain round him.

The next moment the door of what Simpson knew must be the kitchen slammed loudly; and a girl's figure, in a light summer dress, flashed through the hall; twirled round and stood for a moment, poised on tiptoe, bending forward towards the interior.

"Done it! Done it! Every single room. Six pairs of gloves, please, six and a quarter!" she cried: drew herself upright, and flapped her bent arms against her sides — "Cock-a-doodle-doo! — Cock-a —"

"Got you!" Van Rennen's two hands had shot out from the alcove, grasping her firmly by the elbows; then, holding both arms behind her, he bent over the dishevelled head.

"Caught! Fairly caught!"

"Rot! I've won — I did it!" she cried, struggling.

"Story! It was in at one door, all through the house, and then out at the other. And where are you

now? Come, pay up!" laughed the young fellow, and bent his head towards the averted cheek.

With that feeling of utter guilt which overcomes any honest man who sees what he is not meant to, Simpson realised that he was actually going to kiss the girl: there in front of them all.

"Hullo! Van Rennen!" he cried; and in a moment the two were facing round, three feet apart upon the doorstep. There was a pause. Then: —

"Hullo!" responded the young man; and added rather feebly, "I say! I did n't know any one was there."

"It was a bet," put in Julie. "Six pairs of gloves against — against a — a — a — that I'd run through the house." She spoke quickly, still panting and with a scarlet face. Then jamming the soft white felt hat which she had been carrying firmly down upon her head, she pushed back her hair beneath it, — while her eyes swept the two ladies in the car with a defiant air, — and repeated: "Anyhow, I won, so there!"

"I'm surprised. *You* — the daughter of a clergyman, too —" Van Rennen was beginning when Miss Fane claimed his attention.

"Won't you introduce me?" She was laughing as she spoke, as if not altogether ill-pleased. "So you've really stormed the citadel, Miss Cartwright," she went on, waving a beautifully gloved hand as Van Rennen made the introduction. "Mr. Simpson can never again boast that no woman — excepting that

Borgia person who housekeeps for him — has entered these sacred portals. Unless" — and she turned to him with a half-malicious smile —"your servants have orders to exercise a nice discrimination."

"Miss Cartwright knew that she was breaking bounds, as well as I do," responded Simpson lightly. But, for all that, something in his voice, or manner, told Julie that he was annoyed, hurt; though she was shrewd enough to realise that the sting lay less in her tomboy achievement than in the fact that it had been witnessed by this elegantly dressed woman, and smart, cross-looking girl at her side. Upon which a sudden sense of furious antagonism towards them, and intense loyalty towards the Club and its members, — one and all of whom had been unfailingly nice to her, — of regret that she should have vexed Simpson, whom she sincerely liked, and of shame at her own escapade, swept over the girl.

"It had nothing to do with anybody. Mrs. Bliss has known me ever since I was born, but she would n't have let me an inch inside the door if she could have helped it. It was only a lark; I made the bet and ran. He" — here she jerked her head in Van Rennen's direction — "never even took it up."

"Oh, I say, I did. I — it was every bit as much my fault."

"Shut up! It was all my fault, Mr. Simpson." The girl's excitement was evaporating: for a moment her lips trembled. Then she drew herself upright,

and put out her hand with a gesture of boyish frankness: "I'm awfully sorry. It was an unpardonable thing to do. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course, that's all right —" Simpson looked at her kindly. A sudden thought flashed through his head that he would be proud to have such a girl for his own: that the cherished Club was really a ridiculous idea: that he was getting to be a hopeless old bachelor: would soon be too old to see any sons or daughters of his growing up around him. Then his eyes twinkled: — "After all — it is only grown-up ladies who are debarred," he said: "there is no law against children."

With a grimace Miss Cartwright swung round, all her insouciance returned; nodded lightly to Kirkland, then ran down the steps, and — her face dimpling with mischief — leant forward towards the car.

"There's absolutely nothing worth seeing, take my word for it. I've known Fountains Court ever since I could walk, inside and out. And there's not a single addition, not a single Blue Beard's chamber, not even a solitary wife's head," she whispered mysteriously. Then, with a demure little bow, turned and made her way sedately up the drive, without a single glance at her former playfellow.

## CHAPTER X

THE FIRST CLUB DINNER, TO WHICH EACH MEMBER MAY INVITE ONE FEMALE GUEST, IS PREGNANT WITH RESULTS FOR THE ONE MEMBER WHOSE GUEST INVITES HERSELF

THE portraits in the dining-room at Fountains Court must have witnessed many curious phases of life — even the ringleted Early Victorian maiden, the youngest of them all. But it is certain that they could have witnessed few more curiously assorted gatherings than on that night in mid-June, when "The Never-Nevers," as the members of the Club — picking up Julie Cartwright's nickname with delight — chose to call themselves, gave their first dinner.

George Simpson found himself looking down the long table; wondering who would be there next year: what old members would have seceded, what new ones joined. They had only been together for two months, and yet things were beginning to happen. His eyes wandered along the two lines of bright faces, and rested on the youngest member with a sort of wistfulness. How jolly youth was with its intense joys and sorrows, its ardent hopes. What fools men were who put off living till life was half done.

Anyhow, there was Van Rennen, already as good

as lost to the Club, and he was actually glad of it. It seemed as if they were all insensibly changing their outlook on life. Was it the something contrary in human nature? Anyhow, he himself had altered; perhaps more than any of them. His sense of confirmed bachelordom vanished with his very effort to ensure its permanency; for the Club which he had founded, partly from fear of slipping into one of those uncongenial marriages which are the fate of so many men of his age, had already grown to seem nothing more than a retreat, a place of probation — of waiting — though for what he scarcely knew.

During the last month he had hardly been in Town at all. Fountains had somehow become native to him, he hated to be away from it: came back, for the first time since his boyhood, with a sense of really returning home.

Almost insensibly he found himself spending money on the house and gardens: planning for the place, thinking of it, as though it were his own. The seven years' lease, which had at first glance appeared endless, began to represent an intolerable limitation to his happiness; and already he was sounding Mrs. Reannie's lawyer as to whether she might not be induced to sell the place: had even raised his offer with a business man's unassailable belief in the power of money.

The table looked well. Mrs. Bliss, her husband, and Jervis had joined forces to some effect; stimulated, among other things, by their desire to show

Miss Fane and her friend that no help was needed; and a bachelor by no means the helpless, badly served creature that they imagined. Thus all the silver and roses of Fountains Court were on view: the branching candlesticks — down the long table and burgeoning out from between the pictures — all alight. For whoever fitted the place with electric light had stopped at the dining-room, where on ordinary occasions a couple of candlesticks broke the gloom; casting a small circle of light round the little group of men who sat discussing their business affairs; listening to Kirkland's tales, talking of Italian architecture with Gale, or Art with Finch; and in no way indulging in any of those wild debauches with which the neighbourhood credited them.

Half out of bravado, half to prove his spiritual as well as actual freedom, Desmond had persuaded his lost sweetheart to be his guest of honour. Indeed, there was a pretence of friendship between the two; their blatant bonhomie being contradicted by the way in which Desmond watched the girl when she was talking to any one else: by her flushed cheek and dilated eyes when she felt his glance upon her; the exaggerated pleasure which she seemed to find in her left-hand neighbour.

Simpson watched the whole affair like a man in a play, who, waiting for his cue to step upon the stage, amuses himself by observing the other actors. But, apart from this, the girl, with the aureole of misty brown hair, small, rather austere face and dark eyes,

was well worth the watching; her white shoulders and pale yellow dress, backed by the portrait of a dead and gone Reannie in dark armour, standing as if on guard above her.

On Simpson's own right hand was Lilian Fane, who, having constituted herself his special guest, was in a most alluring mood; at which, for the first time, he felt himself safe enough to be amused. For by this she had come too near, made herself too plain. Besides, she did not fit into Fountains, was most palpably an alien.

For the rest — there was Julie Cartwright as Van Rennen's guest, in a girlish white muslin which she abominated and upon which her father — conscious of his weakness in letting her be present at all — had insisted; along with the chaperonage of a lanky brother, a year her senior in actual age, and ten years her junior in knowledge of the world.

"I feel as if I smelt of bread and butter," she complained to Van Rennen. "Why, oh, why was I born with a father who makes sumptuary laws for his womenkind! He says all his sisters wore white muslin till they married — as if that was any reason!"

"Perhaps, if you married —"

"Burned Rome to cook my chop," retorted Miss Cartwright pertly: her equanimity so completely restored by that most intoxicating wine which any woman can sip — a man's unfeigned admiration — that before dinner was half over she had forgotten the despised frock, and was coquetting between Van

Rennen and Kirkland, with as much audacity as any Paris-robed belle; though through all her girlish follies Van Rennen, who knew his world, discerned that sterling honesty and good sense which had, from the first, attracted him. Realising that—though she could hold her own with any of them, was far too shrewd to wear her country heart on her sleeve for town daws to peck at — the heart was there, warm and unspotted. What a pal she had already proved herself, what a mate she might yet prove, he thought; cursing Kirkland, with all his easy traveller's tales.

Banks had chosen for his guest the youngest Miss Strang; who, in a tentatively low dress of grey nun's veiling, sat at his side: half scared like some moth that by chance had fluttered into a circle of lights; among which Banks's own resplendent person — all his other glories focused in the diamond decorating his broad expanse of shirt-front — was by no means the least bewildering.

"The sort of woman who does n't expect a man to make love to her," he had said. And immediately began to do so, with a blatant appeal for pity and understanding.

On Finch's right hand was a gay young widow, who had brought Desmond's partner down in her motor; along with an artist girl whom Gale had invited; one of those women with clever, worn face, short hair, and pince-nez: who — excepting for the accident of dress — might have been equally well

taken for a dissipated young man of twenty, or well-preserved woman of forty; though in reality she was twenty-five: with no past, and far more sentiment than brains.

Kirkland, with a very bad grace, — declaring that next year he would bring a squaw from the wilds of North America, — had allowed himself to be regarded as Netta Stringer's partner: keeping Simpson on tenterhooks by continually turning towards him, and snapping his jaws in vicious mimicry of that young lady's prattle.

Curiously enough, the only unpaired member of the Club was Strang, who might reasonably have been expected to annex a neighbouring lawyer's or doctor's daughter: indeed, Finch had prophesied some such dreary provincial.

During the first part of the dinner he had submitted to a good deal of raillery on the subject; Desmond — who could see little of his partner, excepting a white shoulder, her whole attention apparently engrossed by Gale on her farther side — and Finch both chaffing him unmercifully; till Simpson interfered: partly actuated by a quick glance of sympathy which he observed Lydia Strang flash across the table towards her brother; a piece of by-play which, for no special reason, reminded him of Mrs. Reannie; and started him wondering if the young lawyer had set his affections — or ambitions — on the owner of Fountains. For, whatever the reason might be, he now remembered that Strang

had never made even a pretence of having invited any guest of his own.

The conversation now swung from one side of the table to the other; then eddied round Finch and his partner, who had attacked the tenets of the Club with some spirit.

"After all," protested Finch, "marriage is only a habit. Why, I've heard you, yourself, say: — 'the sort of people who marry —' or, 'the sort of people who don't marry.'"

"How can one make a habit of what may only happen once in a lifetime?"

"Oh, that's just bad luck; never to get a chance to apply one's experiences. But one must hope for the best —"

"After all, there're more lives than one," put in some one.

"What's the good of that?" laughed the widow. "It's palpably a case of gather your rosebuds while you may. For in heaven there is 'neither marrying nor giving in marriage.'"

"And yet that's the very place where we're told that marriages are made!" retorted Finch. "No wonder that they're a failure — palpably the work of amateurs."

"Oh, I don't know; they may judge by past experiences. Think of the spirit of Henry the Eighth, for instance — he ought to know something about it," put in Miss Fane.

"My dear, as if he'd be there," tittered Netta.

"Well, I hope there'll be some people who are n't quite — quite all that they ought to be; or what will you all find to talk about?" said Kirkland, with his quiet sneer.

"The scandalous fact that our heavenly neighbours are *not* married. Oh! there's sure to be scandal; that's safe enough: why, even at Long Ilkley —" began Finch.

"Oh, you people are the scandal here," laughed Julie.

"There you are! We're living in the heaven-like state of single bliss and yet we're traduced. That proves the truth of my contention."

"Well, if you judge by this little Arcadia. The things I've heard since I came here! Scandals? Why, I could make a whole library of novels out of it," remarked Desmond.

"Beginning with an autobiography," flashed round the girl in yellow.

"Dangerous sort of place, the country," put in Banks, with jovial melancholy. "One gets so beastly sentimental. It's the sort of place to fall in love in — if one did n't know better. But once bit, twice shy — eh, what?" And he sighed stupendously.

"Speak for yourself," laughed Finch. "I'm ready to fall in love any day of my life. It's the most gorgeous exercise, as long as you keep your head sufficiently to enjoy your own gyrations; once you begin to get giddy, the fun's over."

"After all," said Desmond, impelled by a desire

to hurt, "the delight of falling in love simply is n't in it with the delight of falling out again: of feeling one's time 's one's own, really enjoying the taste of a good cigar."

"But, after all, what would life be without love?" sighed the artist girl.

"It would n't be at all," remarked Kirkland bluntly; "love being — as some wiseacre tersely puts it — merely a glamour cast by nature to ensure the perpetuation of the species."

"I think that 's a very nasty idea," remarked Miss Fane coldly: half rose and glanced, through a haze of smoke, down the dessert-littered table to where the widow was sitting, with her head very close to Finch's shoulder. If she did not know her place well enough to make the move, some one else must do it; they could not sit there all night; and Miss Fane herself was second only by the accident of having been more particular than the widow could ever have been — as she well knew. Besides, she wanted to have Simpson to herself; he was undoubtedly drifting, and conversation of this sort was not likely to bring him back.

"Don't you think it would be lovely to have coffee out of doors?" Here she rose definitely and nodded across the table to Julie. "Come, Miss Cartwright, I can't have all these cynics corrupting you."

"One would think I was a pat of butter," muttered the girl, "ready to be contaminated by any breath." And she bent, fumbling for her gloves beneath the

table. Then, as she rose — her face a little flushed, not so much from the effort of stooping as from the curious fact that her hand and Van Rennen's had both chosen the same place in which to grope — she gave a little exclamation of amazement.

"Oh!" Her gaze was full on the doorway; and as the other guests followed it they saw that a strange woman was standing in the open space, one hand still on the handle.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she remarked calmly, and dropping a shawl from her head advanced into the room; stood for a moment scanning the amazed company, and then laughed. "I heard that there was one lady short and I thought I would oblige."

"Now, young woman!" Jervis, very red in the face, had his hand upon her arm, but she jerked it free, swept him back and moved into the full circle of light which hung round the dining-table.

"No, don't trouble — I don't need no introducing — Merwin Smith — one of The Smiths — is my name." And here she dropped a mocking curtsy; while her laughing dark eyes swept the double row of guests, who had risen and stood staring, with their napkins in their hands. "Now, tell me, which of you two gentlemen is it as wants a mate?"

Finch, talking it all over afterwards, declared that, from a human, as well as from an artistic, point of view, he had never seen anything finer than the girl looked at that moment. For she had advanced a little into the room, and stood — in the full circle of

light — backed by the picture of the Early Victorian maiden in white muslin — with her deep-breasted figure drawn to its full height, her rounded throat thrown back; a thread of white teeth showing between her full lips, parted on the edge of a smile: her whole appearance so vital that even Julie Cartwright's fresh face paled to mere dollishness.

"Please, sir," began Jervis, with an appealing eye in Simpson's direction: "the young woman was in before we knew where we was. All the doors open and all; and I busy over the coffee-tray. I hope, sir —"

"Leave her alone — clear out, Jervis. It's just what we wanted. A fillip — the something different that makes life worth living! Madam, I drink to your health." Finch's voice was high with excitement as he lifted his glass and bent across the table — then, half turning, caught the artist girl's eye: — "God! what a picture it would make! eh? Composition, light, colour — the whole caboodle."

He was right. The other women, in their light evening dresses, had — all excepting Lilian Fane, who stood rather stiffly by Simpson's side, her face set in an expression of hard obstinacy — sunk back upon their chairs, half laughing, half embarrassed: glancing from one to another, as if in doubt what to do. Finch watching them felt that he hated undecided women: came to the conclusion that their flesh tints were opaque and dull with too much indoor life; that they were artificial through and through;

showed less promise of life in all their bare expanse of breast than there was in that one glimpse of a rounded throat above the knotted handkerchief. Desmond's old sweetheart, immediately in front of him, whom he had admired in her pale yellow draperies, — now half turned with one arm thrown over the back of her chair, — appeared even sickly: should never have chosen such a colour.

Julie, alone, leant forward and stared with frank delight. "It's one of the gipsies from Long Ilkley," she muttered over her shoulder to Van Rennen — "they've been camped there for a week. What a pity she's so late!" — her girlish voice rose high with excitement. "Oh, Mr. Simpson, do ask her to sit down — let 's have some more fruit and things. Let's have coffee here. Oh, of course" — here she clapped her hands with delight — "she's Mr. Strang's guest. There, Mr. Strang, you need not feel out of it any more."

With an odd feeling that it was all of a piece with the place, Simpson bowed across the table. "I believe, as far as any one can be host at a gathering such as this, I am he. And in the name of all our guests" — his blue eyes were twinkling, but he spoke with that rather old-fashioned courtesy which always made Julie declare him "a dear" — "I venture to hope that you will join us in a glass of wine."

Suddenly the girl crimsoned. She had entered the room with reckless defiance, which might have been the result of a bet — for the whole village had talked

of the dinner, and the gipsies easily gathered all there was to be known. Had she been taken by the shoulder and forcibly ejected, she would have fought like a wildcat, but she would not have been embarrassed as she was at Simpson's courtesy; and with a loud laugh she had half turned, as if to beat a retreat, when Desmond's pale little lady rose and caught her by the hand.

"Come — you must sit down with us now. Will you sit by me? Harry, do give her your chair — you and Mr. Kirkland can share." In her excitement and kindly concern she had spoken quite naturally to her old love, and Desmond's eyes caught hers, as he rose, with an eager look which sent the blood eddying over her face and neck, till she almost rivalled the gipsy in colour.

For a moment the stranger hung back, hesitating while her eyes swept the table. "There's a rightful mate for me, an' it's him I'll sit by." Her assurance had returned, and she spoke with all the arrogance of her race, — while her eyes rested full upon Strang, who flushed uneasily beneath her glance, — then moved round the table.

Halfway Finch tipped back his chair — with that flushed, excited glance which with him meant the intoxication, not of wine but of a new face — and, quite forgetful of the pretty widow, caught at her hand.

"Sit by me —"

"Not I!" with a sharp movement the gipsy jerked

herself free. "Love's light come, light go with such as you, my honey."

Netta Stringer was twittering something in Kirkland's ear when he turned his shoulder on her with a brusque movement, and leaning over the rail of his chair spoke along the back of the others in some strange language. But the girl merely answered back, laughingly, in the same tongue: shook her head, and moving on stopped beside Strang, who was fiddling in an embarrassed fashion with the fruit skins on his plate, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Come, mate," she said, "make room. Out of that, poppet"; and she flicked at young Cartwright's cheek with the back of her hand. Then, as the boy rose and tendered her his chair, she sat down, folded her arms upon the table, and peered round into Strang's averted face. "Come," she commanded, her voice deep with all the deliberate witchery of womanhood.

Slowly, as though acting against his own will, with a look almost of disgust on his narrow, ascetic face, Strang turned.

In a moment the gipsy's dark eyes caught his pale ones, while Finch, watching him with rather cruel malice, saw that his hand, which lay on the table, shook.

"Well?" cried Julie, breaking the somewhat oppressive silence.

"Well?" mocked the gipsy; deliberately releasing Strang's glance with a little gesture of irritation.

"We want you to tell us things. Of course you can. About the future — and ourselves. Mr. Simpson, have you any cards? Let's cross her hand with silver! Please — please. You will tell us if we get the cards, won't you?" she went on, leaning forward with clasped hands. "I do — I do so want to know."

"I'm not that sort. We Smiths don't need the cards. We see too plain — the past an' the future too — too plain —" For a moment her glance grew sombre as she lifted a glass of champagne which some one had poured out for her, and held it to the light. "In this — in the light on running water — in your own faces. La! La! Why don't you curtain your faces instead of your windows: hide away the thoughts of you, in place of the letters and such like, that you can leave at home safe under lock an' key?"

Here she tossed off the glass of wine, and nodded portentously: her full scarlet lips pressed close together. "I could tell you now — it would frighten you if I was to tell you all I can read in your faces."

"Tell me — do tell me." Julie was leaning forward, suddenly solemn; her eyes deep with the eternal wonder of a girl on the brink of her first love affair.

"Shake your hawk free from his hood an' tassel. Make him try his wings — he'll be off: but he'll hark back to your heart, pretty child," said the gipsy lightly: then let her eyes range round the table with

a word for each; laughing, scornful, or tender. Blurring over Desmond and his lady, with some indistinguishable talk of a "tall red horse": promising Simpson — with a long meaning glance — his heart's desire: Banks, the curing of the malady he loved: Gale, high success and long sorrow: Van Rennen, a nut-brown wife: returning at last to Strang, who again averted his face, turning as far as possible away from her; too innately conventional to be anything but ill at ease in such queer company.

"An' there's you —" she began, and hesitated, peering round at his averted face: then jerked herself upright with sudden irritation. "Look at me!" she said, turning sideways, sitting bolt upright in her chair: "how can I tell you what I may see in your eyes unless you look? Look at me —! God, man! do you think I'll blight you?

"You've been worshipping at a star," she went on as his unwilling eyes once more met hers. "But you've dropped to earth now; an' the earth 'ull hold you against all; an' you'll never not be free — free as you have been — any more."

For a moment she paused; then, leaning forward, spoke again, with a curious air of concentrated passion. "But there's joy with the terror o' it. For your veins will run wine that have run water. An' all the pain an' the glory o' love be yours. An' a woman's eyes be your hell, an' a woman's breast be your heaven. An' there'll be a heart o' flame against your heart. An' days o' longing, and nights o' passion,

such as the like o' you seldom know. An' then —" With a sudden movement she flung to her feet, her face white, her eyes full of tears, and caught at the glass which young Cartwright had refilled: — "Here's to life an' love, an' the death o' love — an' the pale flower that withers with it," she said, and drained the wine: pushed back her chair; then stood for a moment, regarding them all with a sort of savage scorn.

"You're like puppets," she said. "Tricked out by fashion, dancing to a tune other folks pipe, while luck twirls the string. But there's One as guides the stars, and they guide the fingers as set the strings a-twirling. An' it's by them we gipsy folk guide our way. We — only we!" she added with a splendid arrogance. "He knows, an' we know. He laughs, an' we laugh. When the thread's twisted tight enough, it untwists all over again, an' you're back at your same old tricks — while we go on beneath the stars. By Christ! It's only a sort o' chance for the like o' you, whether you're in with the twisting or the untwisting. The Almighty don't care — till time comes to put out his hand and cut the thread. Then, where are you, never having danced on your own? There's one here as follows a star, an' will reach it — but only one —" Here her eyes rested on Simpson — next to Banks the most unromantic figure of the whole party — with a look of friendly interest and understanding. "But for the rest — it's like him," — and she jerked her head in Strang's direction:

"follow for a while, an' then fail. Not that I blame—I who stand to gain! Garn, it's all chance and folly. I wish ye luck, but wishing o' mine won't bring it.

"I thank you, ladies and gentlemen." Suddenly her voice dropped into the half-whining, half-defiant gipsy twang. "I thank you for your wine, an' your welcome. Those as are good to gipsy folk are good to themselves. An' now I'll wish you good-night an' good luck; till what is left o' you meets this night come a year."

With a sweeping movement she pulled her scarlet shawl up round her shoulders, dragged it into a pent-house over her head; then bent, whispered from beneath it into Strang's ear, swung round, and was gone.

## CHAPTER XI

### A TWENTIETH-CENTURY COURTSHIP DURING WHICH THE MILLIONAIRE'S SON IS PUT THROUGH HIS PACES

"WHERE are you going?"

As Simpson's guests trooped out of the dining-room Julie had run down the steps — Van Rennen at her heels — and was steering her way, with the dexterity of long practice, among the narrow flagged paths of the Italian garden.

"Oh, hang it all!" The young man's voice was sharp with irritation as he stumbled and barked his shins against the stone margins. "Look here! hold on for a moment, I've something to say to you."

"I know." Julie's voice floated back to him with the scent of stocks and verbenas, broken as she doubled and turned. "That's why I'm going on — follow and they flee — flee and they follow."

"Minx!" muttered Van Rennen; blundered over another sharp corner and swore.

"Make haste, or you'll never catch me up." The girl's voice was decidedly farther away.

"Don't you want to — Oh, confound it all! those beastly box bushes seem everywhere, that's the fourth I've crashed into."

"Of course, I want to — to —" mocked Julie.

"Only I don't want to be drilled and marshalled — and arranged" — the words came in jerks, as she negotiated corner after corner — "by that Fane woman. Now — run!"

She broke into the open as she spoke, and sped across the lawn; at the farther side of which Van Rennen, having at last got clear of the maze of paths, — by the crude vandalism of striding through the last few beds, — ran her to ground beneath the chestnut tree.

"You 're always running away," he complained rather resentfully, holding her with both arms pinioned.

"It 's not that I — I — like running," panted Julie, "but it 's good for you — to be pursuer instead of the pursued. When I see the Stringer person looking at you in that 'come hither' way, I feel I want to run and run and run, and make you run."

"But supposing I did n't? "

"Supposing!" Julie gave a contemptuous sniff.

"Well, anyhow, I've got you now — no more bolting round corners — and mean to have it out with you."

"That 's precisely my intention."

"Then why run?"

"Because, my sweet child, — apart from the reason I have already stated, — if I had not desired the pleasure of your company, I should have simply stayed with the others. But now I'm going to sit down." She suited the action to the words, and

pulled aside her muslin skirts to make room for Van Rennen on a bench which stood beneath the chestnut tree: the very place where Jervis had announced her coming, less than a couple of months earlier.

"And, thank goodness, though I'm dressed Early Victorian, I'm not Early Victorian," she went on calmly: "so I can say, 'Spit it out and get it over.' You have your say first, then I'll have mine. Now go ahead."

"Well, first of all, I love you. You know that."

"Guessed it."

"Always have, ever since we had tea together on the doorstep."

"Is that all? Is it my turn?"

"No, it's not. I want you to marry me as soon as possible, say in a week. There's nothing to make any delay about. I've got enough" — he hesitated and grinned — "enough stuff for us to rub along on. And I'll do anything — anything in the world to make you happy: we'll travel — go everywhere you've ever wanted to go, do everything you've ever wanted to do. I know I'm not much of a sort of chap — but there it is —"

"You say that as if it was rather a recommendation. Is that all?"

"Well — yes." Van Rennen's voice sounded flat. He knew there were endless things he might have said in his own favour, endless pleas he might have put forward; but for the life of him he could not think of anything further.

"Then it's my turn."

"I suppose so."

"Well, I've noticed that you say you love me, but you don't enquire if I could love you — seem to take it for granted. I suppose that's the millionaire manner."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean! It's all been great fun. You pretending that you could *just* afford to keep a car: but could n't afford a chauffeur — thinking that awfully poor! Never minding how much petrol we used: getting fresh tyres without turning a hair — oh, shockingly poor! Trying to make me believe that Mr. Simpson let you stay at the Club because you acted as Secretary. You're a very poor actor, my child, or else you are grossly ignorant of the lives of working-people, for you never even attempted to account for the fact that your time seemed entirely your own. Besides that, though you always wore the same suit — excepting on Sundays — I've counted eleven different pairs of boots and shoes: while if you wished to hide the fact that you changed your shirt every day you should have worn plain white, not ones with little patterns."

"O Lord!" groaned Van Rennen.

"No, my dear, my sweet child," she went on smoothly, with a patronising tilt of her small chin: "you're that unfortunate creature, the son of a millionaire: I even doubt if you've ever been licked at school."

"I'm getting it now."

"It's for your good. Well, it comes to this: you're a parasite — and you expect me to become another, on the principle that little fleas have smaller fleas, etc. No, no, I frivol with you, but I work too. I've been working all the time: and at the end of the summer vac I'm going up to Girton, and I'm going to qualify to be something and do something. And if I marry I want a mate; not an ingenious mechanical toy."

Van Rennen rose with rather a white face, and stood before her, his hands deep in his pockets. "Then I suppose I'm turned down — better clear out, since you don't care for me. Though you're quite right; I *am* a rotter."

With a little cry Julie put out her hand and caught at his arm. "No, no! don't look like that. If I did n't care — Oh, Archie, don't be an ass! Don't you see if I did n't care I should n't worry about you, just say 'No, thank you,' quite politely. But it is that I do care so awfully, I want there to be something more to care about." She was standing, very close to him, evidently unaware of the fact that — in a sudden renewal of hope — his arm had found its way round her waist. "We're so young — life's so wonderful: and marriage seems such a tremendous thing, somehow."

"Well, you want me to do something tremendous."

"But I don't want you to risk failure. Have you

ever done anything, managed anything, put anything through completely as your own?"

"I've never had the chance."

"And yet you want to manage me and my life, and our children's lives. For we'll have to have children."

"Lord, yes!"

"Boys, lots of boys — Do you know what I'd like? — To open the nursery door and hear them all, making a furious noise — and then just one girl, to keep them from being too barbaric. What larks we'd have!"

"Oh, I don't know," Van Rennen spoke meditatively: "a girl first. She'd be company for you, a sort of help — besides, girls are simpler to start with."

"Are they, though! That's all you know. No, I must be ever — ever so much older before I'd dare to even begin managing a girl. Anyhow, I don't know that I'm going to marry you at all; at any rate, not till you stop —"

"Stop what?"

"Kissing the back of my neck for one thing — and for the other being spoon-fed."

"Sit down and let's talk it over," suggested Van Rennen coaxingly: — "and if you'll only let me keep my arm here my thoughts will flow ever so much more freely."

"No — it's like the use of a stimulant. — Now, to be serious. Are you really contented?"

"No," answered Van Rennen honestly: "never

have been. That's why I came down here to try and think out a way. But I thought if we tried together, — if you'd only help me."

"That's what I don't want to do. I'd always be remembering it against you: I'm that sort of person. Some one's got to hold the reins; and if it was n't you it would be me; and I'd become unbearable — unbearable, I tell you! But how can you guide me if you've never guided yourself — never done anything for yourself — just sat still and been fed, like What's-his-name by the ravens? I might pretend for a time, but I could n't go on pretending you were boss."

"You've struck it there. But what's to be done?"

Julie crossed her knees, propped one elbow upon them, and cupping her chin in her hand, gazed out across the lawn — where the rising moon cast a vast, gently stirring shadow of the tree beneath which they sat — while, with her spare hand, she ticked off, finger by finger, the points which had to be considered.

"Firstly, you must make money, because without economic independence you can do nothing and be nothing," she said; so glibly that Van Rennen suspected a quotation, though he was wise enough to hold his tongue. "Secondly, you must n't do anything that will take the bread out of another man's mouth. Thirdly, as your parents gave you no profession, did n't even apprentice you to a trade, — think what culpable neglect that would be among the poorer classes, think what Dad would find to say on the subject, — you are entitled to something to

start you. These are what you may call the causes. Fourthly, — and here begin the effects, — I'll marry you, if we're still both of the same mind, when you earn enough to keep yourself in independence."

"Then you do love me?"

"At present: there's no knowing — be quiet, you put me out — where did I get to? Oh, fifthly — fifthly," she waved a small fourth finger vaguely in the air. "Fifthly, you may kiss me if you like. Yes — I do love you —" the stifled admission came somewhat unwillingly. Then with a rush: — "Do you think I'd have played about with you as I have done if I did n't? Love you? You dear simpleton! I love you so awfully I'd wait to the end of my life." She drew herself momentarily free and caught his face between her small brown hands, while her own grew momentarily grave.

"My dear, it's so gorgeous to be so young, to be in love. And I want it to go on getting more and more gorgeous; not to spoil it by gourmandising: snatching at big things we're too raw for!"

"But now" — here she drew back again: "that's enough of kissing, let's be practical. How much money have you got?"

"Oh, I draw on the governor —"

"Draw on the governor, ugh! you make me ill! How much have you got of your own, I mean, absolutely your own at the present moment?"

"Do you mean free so that I can get at it?"

"Of course."

"Well, about five hundred in the bank. But, of course, they've stocks and things, that are practically —"

"No, that's enough. My godfather's going to give me two hundred for my first year at Girton and to get me started; after that I'll have to make my own way; unless I want to come whining home to bread and milk and white muslins. Dad's a dear; and of course Mother — well, she is Mother, but we can't live together. Archie! Isn't it odd? Every one rather expects married people, who have chosen each other, to quarrel; and yet they think that parents and children, who haven't chosen each other and don't possess a single idea in common, ought to be able to live together for ever and ever in unity. After all, my father's only my father because he happened to fall in love with my mother; I wasn't consulted."

"That's a rum way of looking at it."

"And that's not all. I'm not only supposed to love my father and mother, but my uncles and aunts. There's Aunt Clara — you've never seen her — she's not a woman, she's a catastrophe! I don't believe that's original — have a sort of idea I heard it somewhere: anyhow, she's the mater's eldest sister, and because my father fell in love with my mother, I'm supposed to love his relations-in-law whom he hates."

"Thank Heaven, I haven't got any relations, barring my father and mother — I believe you'd

simply love the mater, Julie: somehow you're like her in character. They married when they were awfully poor. You know he made everything he's got off his own bat; and she used to do all sorts of things. I remember she told me she once made a suit of clothes for the governor, and they looked magnificent, only he could n't sit down in them."

"Oh, the darling!"

"They lived in a little tin-roofed shanty, quite close to the mines where he made his pile: and she used to walk about doing her cooking, and washing, and all, with a baby over one arm — there were five of them before me."

"But where are they? I did n't know you had any brothers or sisters."

"Neither I have. They all died out there — except one which just lived for them to bring it home. She said she never had enough to eat and was never off her feet, and worn to a shadow; you would n't think it now; she's awfully fat and looks tremendously prosperous. Then some years later — when they were rich enough to have done anything in the world for all five — I was born; wretched little me all alone! And, of course, she thought every moment I was going to die too; I suppose that's the reason I was what you call spoon-fed."

"I'm sorry — I am sorry, old boy; I had no right to say that." Julie's hand caught his contritely.

"You had every right, and you were right. Now, look here, I've been thinking, perhaps more than

you've given me credit for. Not so much the last few weeks; because — though you do imagine I'm so cocksure — I was in a beastly funk of losing you. Besides, I could n't face the thought of going away."

"There's lots to do in England," said Julie, hedging rather weakly.

"Not for me: — you see I'd be always getting up against the chap who'd got to live by it. But Kirkland has got a scheme on — and I believe I could get a finger in it for what I've got."

"Central Africa, I bet." Julie's tone was gloomily prophetic.

"No — Siberia. Or rather on the Trans-Baikal part of the Trans-Siberian Railway."

"Big game, I suppose?" Julie spoke rather contemptuously, but her heart sank with a feeling that Central Africa could never have chilled her ardour quite so much as the mere mention of the dread word Siberia.

"No, gold. Kirkland heard about it when he was in South America. There was a fellow there who has an uncle, the owner of a large estate near Petrowski Zavod, — at least, that's the station, — exactly between Chita and Irkutsk. He had been fossicking about for ages, believing there was alluvial gold on the place: then, when he had spent all his money and grown old, he at last found it — with no means left of working it decently, poor beggar. He got started somehow on borrowed capital — but had n't enough to keep it going."

"I never knew there was gold in Siberia."

"Any amount: mostly in eastern Siberia, from the river Chikoi along the Schist Belt, and right up to the borders of Mongolia."

"Archie! how do you know it all?"

"Oh, I've been mugging it up. Kirkland has maps and things, but of course he never thought of me really going into it. No one ever does think of my taking anything seriously."

"Even I? Oh, Archie, what a conceited pig I've been! And I did n't even know that there was gold in Siberia!"

"Well, why should you? — you'll learn that at Girton." For the life of him Van Rennen could not resist the thrust. "Well — there are three other fellows in it — a German Jew named Schwartz; and another man, a friend of Banks's, called Hilton, and Banks himself. They don't much want any outsiders till they see how it's going to pan out. They have only the nephew's word for it and some letters he had from the old man, which give certain details and show he's ready to sell. But Kirkland believes it's genuine, and he's going out in another fortnight to inspect the place; you know he's been all through the mill as mining engineer, and railway contractor, and the Lord knows what, before he took to this exploring business. Really, he's only hanging on till he can find another fellow whom he can absolutely trust to go with him, so as to have a witness — and some one left to come back and tell the tale if

one pegs out. The other three have no time, they've too many affairs on hand; and anyhow they're typical city men. I know he'd jump at me."

"What would it lead to?"

"Well, if they took me into it, and the governor lent a hand, it would mean a certain number of preference shares, and a start of my own. Or I might stay there — or go back after a run home to report: they'll need some one on the spot. I've been mugging up the language, too."

"What is it?"

"Russian."

"Would it have to be soon?"

"The sooner the better. You see it's June now, and there's nothing much doing in the winter: anyhow, I'd be back towards the end of November if I went. What shall I do? Look here, I'll leave it with you, little girl."

For a few moments Julie sat silent, staring in front of her, her chin buried deeply in her hand, her lips set firmly in an endeavour to hide the disgraceful fact that they trembled: while — as she battled furiously with the lump in her throat — a procession of at least one hundred and seventy days — more, because every month between June and November, excepting September, owned thirty-one days — paraded with leaden feet through her mind. Days in which there would be no motoring, no lighthearted companionship; days of watching the posts, of starting at every ring in case it should be the

telegraph boy; of being horribly grown-up, and not being able to flirt at all — because it would n't be fair. And then, on the other hand, the alternative. How easy to say "stay": to have a grand wedding, lovely frocks and presents; to go on the Continent — to Florence, to Venice, to all the dream places: to be really a "married lady" able to order every one about. And all within a few weeks' time. What an astounding thing a girl's life was, that such a choice should be possible! And how easy! Just that one little word, like the touch of a fairy wand. He had said he would leave it in her hands; it was for her to choose; and the word trembled on her lips.

But for all that, she did not say it. For through all her longing, her girlish vanity, her dire prognostication of what might happen, how he might be killed, and how his mother would look on her as a murderess, she heard her own voice — or the voice of some other subconscious self — say quite calmly, and with what almost sounded like indifference: —

"Of course, you must go! It's your chance — it would be wicked to throw it away. Of course, of course, only —" Then somehow that other self — that wise, practical self — incontinently retired, having egged her on till no retreat was possible. And she found that she had risen and was clinging with trembling hands to either lapel of his coat, drawing back a little because she simply did n't dare to let him kiss her. "Only, do — do take care. And come back, and don't forget; because I love

you so frightfully: and it's so hard to let you go; and — and —" here she was sobbing in his arms,having won the point for which she fought, and — woman-like — capitulated on all others. But after a very little while, she again thrust him away from her.

"Now I must go home — not there, not back to the house; I can't face all those people. No, I don't want you to come with me, Archie; I want to be alone, it's only five minutes through the shrubbery. Apologise to Mr. Simpson for me; and tell him, because he's a dear. But don't tell any one else. Good-night — good-night, my boy, my darling boy." And for a moment she strained close to him — her white little face upraised in the moonlight; then broke away: while young Van Rennen stood obediently still, tingling from head to foot: waited till the last flash of the white frock had disappeared amongst the trees: then turned and walked slowly back to the house, awed by a deeper sense of joy than he had ever dreamed of as possible.

"Where's Miss Cartwright?" The party were gathered in the hall, preparatory to their departure: Miss Stringer's hawklike eye fixed him in a moment and she pounced. "What have you done with Miss Cartwright?"

"She's gone home — asked me to apologise to you, Simpson," announced the young man, without the faintest attempt at an excuse. "Good-bye, Mrs. D'Esterre: yes, it has been jolly, has n't it? Is your car here?"

"What, without her cloak?" pursued Netta Stringer shrilly. "What an extraordinary way of behaving! We thought you were both lost," she went on. Then, finding that she was addressing the air, for Van Rennen was apparently engrossed in wrapping up Finch's pretty widow — acquiescing in her laughing commands to come and see her: "To keep Agar from boring me to death!" — relapsed into silence; with a shrug of her shoulders and a muffled exclamation of "Hoyden!" — which might have been meant for the widow, though it was curiously inapplicable.

## CHAPTER XII

### VAN RENNEN ARRANGES FOR HIS OWN BANISHMENT TO SIBERIA

THE HONOURABLE AND REVEREND ALGERNON was horrified at the engagement; or rather, not at the engagement, but at the terms of it — the deferred consummation. It was tempting Providence for young people to marry imprudently, but it was tempting it still more not to marry when all the conditions were so — "H'm, eminently desirable," as the fond father declared: enquiring of his daughter if she remembered that she possessed two brothers and four sisters younger than herself: as if, as Julie said, it was the sort of thing that anyone could possibly forget.

"As for this — this wild-goose chase after a fabulous gold mine, — my dear Archibald, — you will permit me to call you that? Surely, such things might be left to — well, ordinary people," he urged, when Van Rennen interviewed him in state, the morning after the dinner party.

"But I am a very ordinary person, I'm afraid. Besides, Julie hates a waster," protested the young man, reddening.

"I'm sorry to say that my daughter has got hold

of some very nonsensical, highfalutin' ideas. From whom I don't know; not from me, I assure you. I am perfectly ready to do my duty in that state of life to which God has been pleased to call me, and I expect Julie to be the same. We are all servants of the Lord, Archibald; but you have your own duties relevant to your own rank in life. And let me remind you that 'they also serve who only stand and wait.'"

"That," remarked Julie — who, with that total absence of nice feeling evinced by the younger generation, had entered the room to see how they were "getting on," as she expressed it — "is bad both for mind and muscle. We're going to wait, but we're not going to stand — or sit down over it, either. Are we, Archie?" And she slipped her arm into her lover's. "He's going out there to let me see what he's made of. I don't mean to marry a slacker — and have little slacklets for children."

"Julie, leave the room!"

"All right, Dad. I'll be in the arbour at the end of the garden, Archie, near where the gooseberries grow. I've got Kirkland's map." And with that she perched on the edge of the low window-ledge, swung over her feet, and dropped out of sight into the garden below.

"Marriage will sober her," remarked her father, with the kindly tolerance of a man whose eldest daughter has just engaged herself to the only son of a millionaire. "She will gain in repose. And, really,

my dear boy, I don't quite know what to say, but the — the — h'm — audacity of ignorance! 'to the pure all things are pure,' as you know: really, it seems only a few days since I found her looking for a — h'm — another little brother in the parsley bed."

"Yes." Van Rennen bit his lip firmly over a widening grin. Then he wondered if there would ever come a time when he would look on those few wonderful years, which transform a child into a man or woman, as "only a few days": even ignore the fact that they had passed.

"An engaged girl is left in a very awkward position," continued Mr. Cartwright. "She is so engrossed she allows her friends to slip, her chances to go. Supposing — mind, I only say supposing, but we are all in God's hands — supposing anything should happen to you on this — h'm — this trip you contemplate taking."

"Well, I believe Julie would rather that the worst happened than that I never did anything to prove myself. But as — I hope you'll not mind my mentioning it, sir —" his honest young face crimsoned, for it seemed degrading even to mention such a thing in connection with Julie — Julie, the frank, the free, the unspoilt; Julie, who had declared that five hundred pounds were quite enough to start him on an independent career; — that she could always manage for herself: — "As for money — of course, one must go into, talk over those sort of things — rotten

as it seems. You know I'm an only child, and I shall get my father to settle the same on Julie as she would have if we were married, and anything happened afterwards."

"And you think that Sir Abel —?"

"I'm sure; he always wanted me to marry a country girl, and a lady — you know, you understand, that we're nobodies, that my father was a common labourer."

"My dear boy, why mention painful facts like these? The ways of the Lord are past finding out. And that was gold, too, was n't it? Very auspicious, very auspicious. And now to be severely practical. May I ask — I do not wish to appear, am not, grasping, but the natural solicitude of a father, you will understand — have you any idea as to what the amount might be?"

"He always said he'd settle a hundred thousand on my wife, if I married a girl he liked."

"Well, now, that is done with. A truce to this odious, this degrading talk of mere ways and means. I shall do myself the pleasure of writing to Sir Abel, my dear son — I may almost call you that, may n't I — just in playfulness? It's such a charming morning; there is such an air of youth abroad; — 'the time of the singing of birds is come' — as Solomon puts it so wonderfully in his sacred songs. I shall write to Sir Abel at once, make a point of it. And now, if you'll excuse me,I believe you will find my daughter in the garden; and perhaps you will come

back to lunch and see my wife. At present she is at the midday service, which is undertaken by my curate, Mr. Swettingham, and which is one of her greatest pleasures."

"I shall be delighted."

"That's right! That's right! Then I shan't say good-bye, my dear, my very dear boy! I can't tell you how glad — how very glad I am at the turn things have taken."

Julie was in the earwiggy little arbour at the end of the kitchen garden: the map, which Van Rennen had brought over with him, spread out on the table before her; covered with a sheet of tracing-paper, and weighted down at the farther side by a cabbage leaf full of ripe gooseberries.

"I thought you were never coming! I picked them all for you; did n't eat one. And now I'm making a tracing of the map, so I'll have a copy for myself. The red are the best, those big hairy ones; if you just bite a tiny hole in them and squeeze them out into your mouth they're simply scrumptious!"

Van Rennen sat down and began to eat gooseberries in the prescribed fashion: there was no doubt that the big hairy red ones were good; peculiarly refreshing after the ordeal through which he had just passed.

"There's no one else coming!" remarked Julie maliciously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, there's plenty of room on the bench — you'll joggle my elbow if you get so near. Look there! what do you think of it?"

"Good, but you've got Kerkerod too close to Petrowski Zavod."

"I know: I shifted the paper a teeny — tiny bit," she confessed shamefacedly. "It seemed such an awful long way."

"Well, shift it back. It will only make you more anxious if you get it into your head that it's nearer than it is. Here, let me do it." And taking both her hands, he first kissed them; then — with a masterly air, which secretly delighted Julie — deposited them in her lap, and started on the drawing himself.

"Well, what did he ask for me?" she enquired idly, as she leant back and watched the firm fingers, the neatly accomplished lettering, with disproportionate admiration.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Dad, of course! What sort of a bargain did he make? He banks in Heaven, you know, — but he loves a little flutter with his floating cash on earth."

"I don't like to hear you talk like that." Van Rennen's voice was grave, though he was apparently absorbed in his map.

"What!" Julie could hardly believe her ears; for never before had her devoted adorer so much as hinted that anything about her was not absolutely perfect — completely adorable.

"I don't like the way you speak about your father; it's not good form."

"My dear Archie! what should you know about—" the girl paused in sheer horror at the words which she had found upon her lips.

"Well, not ordinary decency, then," put in Van Rennen coolly: — "which is really just as common in my class as in yours."

"You know I did n't mean —"

"You know that I know that I'm not your class: so what's the good of pretending." Van Rennen's tone showed an absolutely unruffled good humour.

"I suppose now you think that I care about you, you'll begin to see all sorts of faults in me."

Julie's voice was tearful. She had been awake all night, in a state of strained excitement, transcendental happiness; and now — all of a sudden — everything seemed to have grown flat and unprofitable.

"Don't be a duffer, Julie; how many times have you jumped on me? There you are!" — and he leant back and gazed with pride at the map. "Now, when we go into the house we'll put a cross of red ink on Kerkerod, so it'll stand out from all the rest. Then another red cross about twenty-eight versts from that — and that's where the mine will be."

"I don't care."

"You don't what!"

"I don't care — you don't care. I'll set you free, you can do what you like. You need n't go at all:

you need n't go up to Town for the ring," cried Julie, the knowledge that she was behaving like a spoilt baby driving her on to a fury of pretended indifference. "You can marry that Stringer person for all I care."

"But I don't want to marry that Stringer person, as you call her, and I do want to marry you. And I mean to go to Petrowski Zavod. I even mean to go up to Town to buy the ring: but not till to-morrow, because I awfully want you to come with me and be introduced to my mother."

"Perhaps she won't like me either." Julie's voice was gloomy; but with the self-depreciating gloom of one who is "coming round."

"Perhaps she won't. But the chances are ten to one that she will; our tastes are very much alike. Are you angry? Don't waste time being angry, sweetheart, when we've only a fortnight, perhaps only a week together."

"What!"

"Kirkland 's mad to be gone; and the sooner we're off the sooner I'll be back —

"A week — only a week! Archie! I can't bear it! I can't let you go! I can't, though I was such a pig to you just now. Don't go yet — a week! A week, or even a fortnight 's no time at all. Some day, Archie, some day, I 'll be braver."

"Look here, Julie." Van Rennen held her very close, raising her chin with one hand and looking into her eyes which were swimming in tears. "You 're

not going to show the white feather yet — give up trying to do something with me!"

"Of course not! But we're all right as we are — I was mistaken, I did n't understand. Anyhow, not yet, not yet, Archie."

"And there's a lot for you to do: any amount," went on Van Rennen, almost as if he had not heard her. "You've got to coax my mother, talk her round. I count on you to help me, to see me through."

With a sudden wrench, like a physical effort, the girl pulled herself together.

"All right! I will. I promise, Archie. And I'll be awfully, terribly good. I won't laugh at Dad, or do anything you don't like — at least, more than I can help. There'll be heaps of things you'll want in Town. I wish I could be there to help you." With a sense of infinite heroism Julie drew a little apart from her lover, and spoke in a briskly practical tone.

"I wired to the mater — a hundred and twenty-five words, all about you! She's sure to ask you to stay."

"And I'll help you. We'll make a list. I'll get some more paper. You'll want a saddle and long boots, and furs, and overalls, for the mines; and provisions and all sorts of things. We'll make a list, then we'll get Mr. Kirkland to check it. And you can tell him you'll be ready in a week if he likes. And — and — if I make an ass of myself —"

"I'll marry Miss Stringer —"

"No, you won't. You may box my ears — or go

into a monastery — but marry that creature you shall not! Archie, she's so metallic she'd tang if you touched her; if she broke an arm or leg, she'd have to be soldered together." And Julie laughed rather hysterically. "There's the luncheon bell, so poor Mother must be back from church."

"Poor, — why, does n't she like it?"

"My sweet child, does any one like a midday weekly service? To toddle off to church just in the busiest part of the morning? Dad takes jolly good care not to go: hands it over to the curate, says — Oh, I forgot!" Here Julie drew herself up with a jerk. "I thought of something awfully, screamingly funny to say. But I won't say it. You see, Archie, I'm beginning already."

## CHAPTER XIII

DESMOND MAKES HIS PEACE, THROWING OVERBOARD, WITHOUT A SINGLE QUALM, ALL THE TENETS OF THE CLUB

DESMOND had achieved a few words with his lady while Van Rennen did his courting. It had been difficult. There was always something elfish and elusive about Dorothy Sartoris; a delicately cool faculty for withdrawing herself, her personality, almost her humanity, which held others — when she so chose — at an immeasurable distance. Desmond had caught this trait in his book; and with it the intense fastidiousness which might harden to narrowness, the icy lift of her voice when she was annoyed: the curious, quiet jealousy; the reserve which made — had she but known it — a love like his as necessary to her whole being as is sunshine to a plant. For, despite all her faults, she was capable of a passionate devotion: of charming generosity in greater things, such as — in the small — had shown itself by her impulsive words to the gipsy: the way in which she had included Desmond in her own kindly act.

"Harry!" The mere utterance of his name had set all the man's warm Irish blood aflame. She was so small and tender, even her quaint, precisely marked faults so lovable. He had struggled des-

perately between his devotion towards his art and his sweetheart: might have destroyed the offending book and healed the breach at once — as he well realised. But that was beyond him; as repugnant as the murder of his own flesh and blood. Somehow Dorothy and his work seemed to have grown antagonistic. He was continually torn between the two. Even the division of his time had grown to be a difficulty — while it had never occurred to him that the two interests might become one; that Dorothy's intensely concentrated affection might be so managed as to include his work, could he once prevail on himself to conquer that reserve which encompasses the creator, and share with her — not only the fruits — but the source of all his work.

Then, in a flash, at the sound of his name had come an inspiration — as sudden as his conception of a new book. He would make her a partner in this business of his brain.

The thought possessed him. "I want to speak to you," he whispered, as a general move followed the gipsy's departure.

Then, over the coffee-cups in the porch: — "Dorothy, I *must* speak to you."

It had seemed so simple. But when she raised her grave eyes to his and enquired with icy politeness, in a perfectly audible tone,— "Yes, Mr. Desmond, what is it?" he realised the difficulty of the task he had set himself; sulked for a moment or so, then drew Simpson aside.

"Look here, Simmy, I want to talk to that girl alone; for the Lord's sake, call off some of those women."

Simpson nodded: debated for a moment or so whether he would dare to take Miss Fane for a moonlight ramble; then changed his tactics and turned to Dorothy herself.

"There's a picture in the morning room I want to show you;" he said in a low voice, hoping that the artist — who was talking to Kirkland, with a roving eye and an air of listening to every one else — would not hear him. "Will you come and see it?" He half-turned as the girl, a little puzzled, signified her assent; stood aside to let her pass; and then, apparently for the first time, observed his co-conspirator.

"Oh, there's Desmond! He knows far more about it than I do. Desmond, will you take Miss Sartoris to see the Madonna in the morning room? I would like to hear your opinion of it," he added mendaciously. And turned, with a sense of infinite well-doing, towards Miss Strang, who was sitting alone, while Banks strutted and plumed himself beneath the mocking gaze of Finch's widow.

Dorothy was certainly not too encouraging. She felt she had been trapped: realised a conspiracy. But gradually she relented. And, indeed, it would have been difficult for any one — let alone the woman who loved him — to resist Desmond for long. He was so big, so splendidly handsome, so completely a child.

"If you'll only take us both together, my art and I as one — inseparable — and yourself as the other; always two of us, never three — that odious three! — and will help me, I may do great work. But if you are jealous of it —"

"I was never jealous of it," the little lady thawed enough to protest. "But I felt out of it. It was your life. I was like a doll put on a shelf; taken down to be dusted and played with: a best doll, a precious doll I allow. But like a child's best toy, never part of your daily life. I'd rather" — the difficult tears were in her eyes and she spoke with that sharp detachment — as if each word were a bitten-off thread — which she used when greatly moved, "have been thumped — banged on the floor, if only I might have been loved every day."

"Child, child, you were." Desmond's arm was round her by this time. "I worshipped you — you know I worshipped you."

"That's what I complain of: seemed to worship me, and yet dissected me; made a careful drawing of my heart and soul — Oh, no, it was no caricature, I won't wrong you in that, it was true to life! fiendishly true! — Then distributed me to the British Public at six shillings a copy — retail: how much was it wholesale, eh, Harry?"

"I was a brute: I don't know how I did it. 'Pon my soul, I don't know how I did it. The thing grew — I did n't even know that it was you: I swear I did n't."

"That makes it worse. If we married it would be our life: our children: every difference we had, every folly we committed."

"No, no, you're wrong there, Dot —" No one else ever called her by that silly little name, and how she would have resented it if they did. "By Jove! I'm cured this time; once and for all. Catch me using any one I know again — unless," he added honestly, "a public character, or some one like that, whom nobody minds. Look here, my darling, — do you know that's the first kiss for eight months? — I'll write a book with every character absolutely imaginary — not a single person in it you can put your dear little finger on and say, — 'That reminds me of So and So': — just to show you I can do it."

"I wonder if you can." Dorothy — standing with both hands on his shoulders — looked up, tenderly enough now, into the ardent face bent above her.

"Of course I can — The second kiss! — Twentieth? Oh, nonsense. The last was like a serial, a lot of chapters but all one story. — Of course, I can do it, if I set my mind to it. And what's more you shall choose me a plot: and we'll marry on the proceeds of the partnership. Come now, Dot, a plot — a plot!"

"Wait — let me think." The girl drew a little away from him, and stood, with one small foot on the fender. "I've heard lots of things: often thought since we've been apart — even before, only I was afraid you'd laugh at me — 'There's a thing that

would make a fine plot for Harry!'" Again she paused, frowning: then glanced up, and catching sight of the calm face of the Madonna, which she had come to see, was reminded.

"There was one thing — it was only an idea, a word or two. I don't know what led to it. At a tea-party one day some one said, 'Odd if a man invented a new religion — just for the sake of making money, humbugging people — and then grew to believe in it himself.' It seems such a little thing," she added half apologetically. "But, somehow, it struck me as being dramatic — possible."

"Dramatic! Why, it's fine!" — cried Desmond excitedly. "The very words create the man — I seem to realise him, feel him, know him: could draw him to a T. By Jove, it would make a powerful novel! Of course, there'd be a girl, too, — a girl like —"

"No likes." Dorothy held up a reproving finger.

"Well — like nobody else. But the man's character's the thing. A fine possibility there. And I can do it, I know I can. I feel it in me. It bites, Dot; somehow it bites!"

"Well, do it," she said: "and then — then we'll talk things over."

## CHAPTER XIV

### LADY VAN RENNEN INVESTIGATES THE AFFAIRS OF THE KERKEROD COMPANY: AND ARRANGES FOR ANOTHER AND A VERY DIFFERENT PARTNERSHIP

For a while Fountains Court lost its character of a mere play-house.

Desmond, after various flying visits to his publishers in Town, took up his permanent quarters there and buried himself in his book.

Parrifleet arrived, and was soon immersed in the fashioning of a service of beautifully embossed pewter finger-bowls, each set with the special birth-gems of the several members: deserting this to work upon what he called a "ring of strength" for Van Rennen — to whom he had taken a great fancy — set with the seven stones of the days of the week: the ruby, emerald, selenite, amethyst, onyx, turquoise, and agate; which, arranged in a certain fashion, — or so he told Julie, — protected its wearer from all possible danger.

Van Rennen himself had become one of the most indefatigable workers. Every day he either motored up to London with his betrothed and — after depositing her at his mother's house — spent hours in a dreary, dimly lighted office in Broad Street, discuss-

ing every detail of the Kerkerod affair with the other men; pored over maps and estimates with Kirkland in the Fountains library; or shopped with a new care and discrimination: even — this to his mind being a triumph of economy — enquiring the prices of the articles he wished to purchase.

To his surprise Lady Van Rennen needed no coaxing: she took to Julie at once; for the primitive reason that she was not "pasty like those London women," and looked likely to bear healthy children: confided in her the precise details of the birth and death of the five which had preceded Archie: presented her with a diamond tiara, which — in conjunction with the historic white muslin — Julie wore one evening at the Rectory high tea — to the admiration of the house parlourmaid, who declared it was wonderful how they "got up them things to look like real": wept over her son: egged him on to public demonstrations of affection: bought him cholera belts and an elaborate and perfectly useless cooking apparatus — against her better judgment, knowing by experience that there was nothing so good as a kerosene tin. Finally she motored down to Fountains, and would have appalled everybody by her dress, diamonds, and dignity, had she not stumbled over one of her innumerable lace flounces, coming up the terrace steps, and rapped out a clear-cut — and what Finch termed an eminently lovable — "damn!" — this to the delight of her future daughter-in-law, who already adored her: classed her as a "dear" in the

same category as Simpson and Parrifleet: chummed up with her: treated her as though they were precisely the same age, and completely won her heart.

Really it was a strictly business visit, to enquire into the prospects of Kirkland's scheme. Sir Abel had been expected too, but was prevented by a crisis in what his wife termed — with all the hatred of an old miner for any other industry — "the antics o' them unnatural Rubbers."

However, — at first somewhat to their amusement, — she put, not only Kirkland, but Schwartz and Hilton, who were there from Saturday till Monday, briskly through their facings.

"The boy's a child; scarcely knows he's been born," she declared — a remark that Van Rennen took with great good humour: though later on he confided to Julie — "If I don't know, it is n't that I've not been told all about it, with every possible detail."

"If the scheme's sound," went on the old lady, "Sir Abel will be willing to —" she hesitated a moment, then added discreetly: — "well, to think things over. And since he's been prevented from coming here himself, an' there ain't nothing he does that I'm not, so to speak, in, I'll take upon myself to ask a few questions. If a thing's fair an' aboveboard it 'ull bear enquiring into, that's my principle. No offence meant, and none taken, I hope, gentlemen."

"Certainly not: I speak for all of us — eh, what?" answered Banks effusively. For upon the financial

world where — when not at Fountains — he lived and moved and had his being, Sir Abel Van Rennen shone from afar; like a sun of the first magnitude.

But the old lady brushed him aside with a glance.

"Well, what I want to know is this. My lad here has told us that you have the option of buying this Siberian mine, as I hear tell of, for a matter of forty thousand pounds, and that you'll need capital to develop it. Now, what do you propose to do? If our name's in any way to be mixed up in it I have a right to ask that."

"Certainly, Lady Van Rennen: and I shall be only too happy to inform you," answered Schwartz, to whom she addressed her remarks — holding the theory that "one always knows where one is with a Jew, which is more than one does with most Christians": — "We propose to float a company with a nominal capital of two hundred thousand, in one pound shares — of which sixty-five thousand would be six per cent preference shares — and a bonus of sixty-five thousand fully paid-up ordinary shares. I may tell you we already have a guarantee of sixty-five thousand pounds cash."

"What about the sum needed for development?"

"I am coming to that. Our friend here, Mr. Kirkland, has reason to believe that the present owner will be willing to take part of his forty thousand pounds in shares. It appears that he is a man of few personal needs, and is more anxious that the mine should be in full working, for the sake of his people

than for any very great or very immediate financial profit — as far as he himself is concerned. Is n't that so, Kirkland?"

"Yes; at least, that's what I gathered."

"Well, then, supposing we find that he will be satisfied with twenty-five thousand pounds in cash, and the rest in ordinary shares. That would leave us forty thousand pounds in hand — less expenses — for developing purposes. As to the remaining ordinary shares, a good block should go to us, as holders of the option over the mine; while the balance could remain in reserve for later issue, when the expenses may be increased. Is that not so, gentlemen?" he continued, glancing round at the other three, who nodded their assent.

"Now, what am I to understand as to the guarantee of that sixty-five thousand pounds which you tell of?" enquired Lady Van Rennen, with her shrewd eyes full upon him, her long upper lip drawn down, her lower one thrust out, her round face alive with concentrated attention.

"That is from bankers in Paris, and is absolutely certain. Of course, they come in; and at the same time we should be glad of a limited number of other shareholders; though we do not, as yet, intend to offer indiscriminately to the outside public. Should you, or any of your friends, desire to take up a five per cent participation in the affair you must be prepared to put up a hundred in the first place. Then — when the mine is bought — five per cent of the sixty-

five thousand; for which you will receive three thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds of six per cent preference shares, and three thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds of bonus shares. Of course, there will be certain expenses necessarily incurred by Mr. Kirkland, who is going out as inspecting engineer; and your son, who, I believe, accompanies him."

"Roughly estimated at two thousand pounds," put in Kirkland. The old lady nodded. Her dark eyes were screwed up to the merest slits, her bonnet on one side, her knees wide apart. Yet, in spite of all this, she presented a curiously impressive picture, as she sat enthroned in a large garden chair, with the little group of men — in their light summer clothes — seated round her: bending forward, as keenly interested, as eager to create a favourable impression as though she had been the great Sir Abel himself.

"Now, as to this precious mine. What sort of reefs are they?"

"Quartz — with slate, which, according to reports, is thickly veined with gold: gold of high standard, nine hundred and seventy fine."

"What 's the output been?"

"There are four reefs, only one as yet in working; the crushing being done with a five-stamp battery. Up to last autumn there had been three thousand, three hundred and twenty-eight ounces produced from four thousand, one hundred tons."

Again it was Kirkland who spoke; leaning forward, his hands tightly clasped between his knees, his

leathery face rendered almost stupid by his habitual concealment of all expression.

"With a ten-stamp battery we calculate that we might crush — counting three hundred working days to the year — nine thousand tons, producing six thousand, seven hundred and fifty ounces of gold; which — deducting government charge — would net us twenty-seven thousand pounds. But we hope to do more than that. By the end of this year we expect — if all goes well — to have installed thirty head of stamps; and go on increasing this till we have a hundred head in working. But for that, of course, more money would be needed; though the profits would run up to as much as a hundred and fifty thousand a year."

Again Schwartz took up the tale: Banks chipping in occasionally with an acumen which would have surprised any one who had only seen him under social conditions. The whole conversation — eddying round Lady Van Rennen, whose bonnet became each moment more awry — swung to and fro between the three men; while figures were piled one upon another, in a fashion which astounded Julie — on whom eggs at a shilling or one and two a dozen: butter at one and three or eighteenpence, had always been impressed as affairs of the utmost moment; for the Honourable and Reverend's household was conducted on lines which allowed for a fine display of cut-glass and silver, and but little margin in the matter of food.

The means of transport: the water supply: the

labor market: wages: hours: the permanency of the mining rights: the attitude of the government; the depths of the reefs; the wood available for timbering, were all in their turn examined. The old lady's astute questions, each as pointed as a lance, searching out every possible crack in Schwartz's armour.

But at last she rose, declaring herself satisfied, though she made no promises, passed no remarks: sat down again, to drink the tea which Simpson ordered; and — with a handkerchief over her wide spread knees — devoured a vast quantity of hot cakes, while diverting them all by tales of her old digging days.

"A shrewd business woman: a pleasure to talk to a woman like that!" commented Banks, as they stood on the steps, waving their adieux to the departing car. "Believe she thinks well of it, too — eh, what?"

"That, my very good friend, is what neither you nor I nor anyone else knows," replied Schwartz, "excepting the fair lady herself. For she's one of those rarest phenomena of nature: a woman who knows how to keep her thoughts to herself."

As it chanced, however, Banks was right; for three days later came a letter from Sir Abel signifying his willingness to provide ten thousand pounds of the working capital of the Kerkerod Mining Company, and allow his own august name to appear among the directors: on certain conditions — conditions which caused Schwartz to remark that the mining magnate and his wife were a well-matched couple.

# PART II

## CHAPTER XV

### SOME FRUIT OF THE FIRST DINNER PARTY BY WHICH STRANG IS TORN WITH MANY DIVERSE PASSIONS

It was an evening in late November, and dinner was just over at Fountains Court: or rather, it had reached the pleasant stage of wine, coffee, and cigars: while Finch was still busy over an orange.

Banks, however, had already risen and was standing, warming himself at the fire: his coffee-cup on the mantelpiece, and his large person expanding in front of the blaze, like some fleshy and opulent flower. He had only come down that night, fresh from the City, the close atmosphere of capital and Toryism, and was holding forth in his unctuous fashion to Finch and Simpson — the only other members present — on the fact that England was "going to the dogs": that he, for one, was glad his money was out of it: that some one ought to do something, and that quickly: indulging in such a lengthy tirade that Finch — having at last finished his dessert — lit a cigar, and sitting sideways at the table began to pass the time, till he should be able to get in a word, by sketching him on the back of a menu card.

"Another year — I give 'em another year — and the Germans will be here."

At last Banks paused for breath; and Finch cut in: —

"At this very dinner-table, sipping our port, smoking our cigars," he remarked mockingly, his pencil flying. "I must polish up my German; we'll read Goethe together."

"It's all very well to talk. It's fellows like you — with your beastly Socialistic ideas — that have brought the country to the state it's in now."

"*Me* — Socialistic? Ye gods!"

"Well, what are you then — eh, what? — All you artist fellows, who don't take anything seriously; with your everlasting sniggering at religion and everything else! If you are n't Socialistic — God, I don't know what Socialists are, or what you are. Are you a Liberal —? Tell me that. No. Are you a Conservative? No. Then, damn it all, man, what can you be but a Socialist? All the Johnnys that don't know anything or care anything are Socialists. It's the spirit of the times — and damned bad times they are too. Damned bad tone: in everything, affecting everything. The markets — look at the markets, for instance — no firmness anywhere. It's like that man — what do you call him — that you fellows are always raving about! Shaw — Bernard Shaw. Always chopping and changing. You think it's damned funny to wear a red tie, an' start fellows striking. But where will you Socialists be when

there's no more money left in the country? And it's affecting everything, I can tell you that. Why even in the Near Far East — City o' Constantinople Five Per Cents — have you seen 'em to-day, — eh, Simpson? An' Russian Fours, — eh, what? By Jove, there'll be the devil to pay if it goes on."

"I wish I could follow you, Banks; you business men are so vague," remarked Finch plaintively. "You won't put money in English concerns because England's going to the dogs, and it does n't seem much good putting it in anything else, because everything else is affected by this curious state of being fit and ready for the kennels, from which England has suffered ever since I remember. And the oddest part of it all is, that it's the fault of the Socialistic chaps, who you say don't do anything. Truly it's a mad world, my masters."

"Do anything! Of course, they don't do anything, but talk: every fool knows that. My God, though, they'll get a surprise when they wake up some day and find that all the German waiters have mobilized, an' the German battleships are thick along the Channel. By Jove, that'll teach 'em."

"To be prepared another time — in another life; as you are preparing now, — eh, Charlie, my dear? George, here you have Banks prepared to repulse the Germans and rescue England from the 'demnition bow-wows.' What do you think of that?" And he tossed a vivid sketch — representing Banks,

swelling with patriotism and a seven-course dinner — across the table to Simpson.

"Do you notice he's all curves? There's not a straight line anywhere; excepting the two sides of his necessarily shallow collar, beneath his darling dimpled chin. Even his ideas are circular."

"Finch, you're damned impertinent!" — Banks was beginning furiously, when Jervis entered the room and bent over Simpson.

"Mr. Strang to see you, sir, directly you've finished dinner."

"Won't he come in? — Ask him to come in, Jervis, and have some coffee."

"No, sir, he won't come in. He says it's very pressing. An' — if you'll excuse me, sir — I think there must be some trouble, he seems very flurried like and put out."

"God! I hope it's nothing wrong at home," put in Banks, puffing out his cheeks importantly. "Are you sure he did n't ask for me, Jervis? I'd better go and see him, — eh, what, Simpson? The decent thing to do — old friend of the family, an' all that, you know."

"Mr. Strang said as how he particularly wanted to see Mr. Simpson alone, if you'll excuse me, sir," interposed Jervis.

"Yes, I'd better see him alone." Simpson had risen from the table, his kind face clouded with anxiety. "Poor Strang; decent sort of fellow that; hope there's nothing wrong. If it's all right I'll

bring him back here — excuse me, you fellows," he said; and then added: —

"Where did you put him, Jervis?"

"In the library, sir," replied the man; and held open the door to let his master pass out before him.

Strang, who was standing upright in the middle of the library, making no pretence of occupying himself, raised his head with a sharp, nervous gesture as his host entered; then moved a step forward.

"Look here, Simpson," he began, as if beyond all pretence of a formal greeting. "Look here, I want you to help me. I don't know what to do. I'm in hell — by God, I'm in hell!" The man's face twitched as he spoke, and jerking his handkerchief from his pocket he wiped his forehead. "I don't know what to do; tell me what to do," he repeated helplessly.

Simpson put out his hand and touched the bell. "The best thing you can do, to start with, is to have a good stiff brandy-and-soda. Then sit down here by the fire, an' tell me how I can help you."

"I can't sit down. It's gone on all this time: and I 've kept quiet about it — no one could have guessed. But now I feel as if I never could sit still again. My office — by God, Simpson! — you can't imagine what my office has become to me. I feel as if I could burst the walls with the hell inside me — as if I *must* burst them! I've —" he broke off sharply as Jervis entered with a tray: then, throwing off

the strong draught which Simpson poured out for him, went on, directly the door closed.

"It was only to-night, all of a sudden, — I felt that I 'd go mad if I did n't tell some one, — I thought of you. I don't know why except that you seemed so solid and quiet, and I knew you understood the world, would help me, would n't laugh at me. I felt sure of that — though I don't know why."

Simpson, who had sat down in a big chair by the fire, and was smoking, — with the idea that somehow his calmness might, in time, soothe the other, — nodded.

"Of course, I 'll do anything I can; go on."

"Well, you remember — at your dinner that Merwin —"

"Who?"

"Merwin Smith — the gipsy girl who came in late — now you remember? Well, they've camped here, been here all the summer and autumn." Strang cleared his throat huskily.

"Do you recollect? I had no guest? She said that I was her mate? I thought at the time that it sounded horrible — like an animal. But you all laughed. By God, just to think of it! — You all laughed. It seemed a sort of joke then. But it was true — She says we must have been meant for mates since the stars were made. And, Simpson; look here, Simpson! I believe it's true. There are things I hate about her: personal things: her way of speaking, of looking at life — her very way of loving me. But I

can't get free — though I hate it. It's like being possessed: all my flesh seems alive with longing for her when she's away — though we can't be together without quarrelling. She's in everything; comes between me and my work. I can't even see a child without wondering what her child and mine would be like; can't look at a woman as I used to do. Look here, Simpson, 'pon my word, I did n't know I 'd *got* a body before, beyond a head that ached, or tired feet: but now I 'm all body. It 's as if I was raw from head to foot. I don't know how it was — I used to be half ashamed; felt I was n't quite like other men; but nothing roused me. I did n't seem able to feel — well, in that sort of way. I suppose it was all the responsibility and living with my mother and sisters where I 'd been all my life; where every one knew me. Partly that, and partly" — here his voice dropped — "worshipping some one as far above me as the heavens. That's it — that's the awful part of it, Simpson — I worship her still — in a sort of way — with my mind, with the best of me. But for the rest, Merwin has me, body and soul." The man came to a sudden pause in front of Simpson, gripping the back of a chair, while the sweat stood out on his forehead. "And now, what am I to do? It's come to this — I must do something."

"You mean you've been meeting her — making love to her?"

"Making love!" Strang jerked out a harsh laugh: — "Yes, if you can call it making love, when one's

swept off one's feet — by a torrent — a rushing flame."

"You mean she's — she —" Simpson hesitated.

"No — no. Don't wrong her there. It's my doing as much as hers,— some devil in me. Do you know, I don't remember what it's like to have had a quiet mind — to be able to sleep properly. And yet only five months ago —" For a moment he was silent: then broke out again: "And it's as bad for her: for — God only knows why — but she loves me, too. There's no doubt about that."

For a moment Strang paused, wiping his brow; then moved over to the fire, and stood gazing into it: "No, after all, it's not the same — not so bad. She loves love; it's part of her nature: loves all the excitement and unrest, all the wild passion; it's in her blood. But with me — you know, Simpson, how well ordered my life has been; the same thing at the same time, every day: the peace, the settled feeling of it all."

"And that's what you value!" remarked Simpson rather scornfully: — "Yet you're ten years younger than I am."

"It's what I'm used to somehow," answered Strang, almost peevishly: — "the other upsets me, frightens me. I've always been taught that all excitement and emotion were out of place — vulgar. And yet — and yet! I can talk of her now almost calmly, think of her calmly: feel that I'd give anything to be free, never to have seen her; because" —

here he looked up, and laid one finger upon the dial of the clock upon the mantelpiece — "it's just — counting the time I've been with you — one hour since I've left her. Two or three hours more, and I'd give my soul to hold her in my arms."

"You say the girl loves you. Has she —" Simpson flushed all over his honest face. "Has she — how far has it gone? Have you — have you been fair to her?"

"I've done — done what other men do, I suppose."

Strang jerked back his head with the half-defiant, half-satisfied air of a boy who has proved himself a man. Then, suddenly remembering all that it meant, his face twitched again.

"But — I must get out of it! Something must be done. I've not got only myself to think of, and I can't do my work — anything. You can advise me. You're a man of the world: must have been in such holes yourself."

"No," said Simpson quietly.

Strang stared: "Well, anyhow, you will know what to do: will help me."

"As far as I can see, the best thing, the only thing, will be for you to go away; for a time, at least."

"It's out of the question. I'm just settling up all the Clevedon estate. They'd think I was mad. It would ruin me — ruin my business. And there's my mother and sisters to be thought of."

"Well, the girl must be got away. Are they all there?"

"No, only a couple of families, and an old grandmother and cousin of — of hers, who stayed behind the rest of the tribe."

"Can you persuade her to go away?"

"I can't! Simpson, I can't! You don't know what it is when I'm with her. Even when we're quarrelling, there's no one else. She'd go if I as much as hinted it — she's as proud as Lucifer: but I could n't. I've tried it before — said things: and then done all I could to make it up. It's like a curse — how can such things be! We would never be happy together — think of my mother and sisters! And yet I could n't do it — I *could n't* do it, Simpson. Don't you see? It would be like cutting off my own limbs."

"Well, it seems to me that the only thing will be for me to see her myself. If I promise to try and speak to her to-morrow morning, will you give me your word of honour not to see her first?"

"Yes, I promise, I swear it. I won't come out of my room. Only, for God's sake, do it early. There's no telling — perhaps when I know it's all over, I'll have some rest, some peace."

"There's only one thing. You are sure there's no — no fear of consequences: that the girl's all right, or I won't move a step unless it's to force you to marry her; I don't forget that you met her in my house, that she was my guest as much as any of you."

"No — no, I am sure. Of course, of course, she would have told me if there was the remotest fear of

that. My God, how awful it would be!" The young lawyer's face was wrung afresh at the thought. "But there's no fear of that: on my word, Simpson; on my word as a gentleman!"

"Very well. You need n't swear about it, you're not in the witness box," remarked Simpson, rather irritably, for he was beginning to feel disgusted: — "Where is it that they're camped?"

"Do you remember the double row of elms on either side of the road when you get out of Long Ilkley? Just at the end of that there's a grass road, with high hedges, branching off to the left."

"Yes, I always wondered where it went."

"It goes nowhere. After a couple of hundred yards it widens out, then stops dead in front of a gate leading into a field. And it's there, at the end of the lane, they've got their camp."

"All right; I'll go in good time to-morrow, and see what I can do."

"Thank you, Mr. Simpson." Strang pulled himself upright with a jerk. "Indeed, I never can thank you sufficiently. I feel that my confidence will be — h'm — absolutely safe in your hands. And —" suddenly it seemed as though the man was once more enfolded in the combined conventionality of generations of country lawyers, as in a mantle which hid all his personal characteristics. "And if any pecuniary claims are made by any of the rest of the clan, I must ask you to settle the matter — within a certain limit — as seems best to you; and let me

know the extent of my indebtedness. You understand the — h'm — the absolute necessity for secrecy?"

"I need hardly reassure you on that point," replied his host rather stiffly, as he rose and shook hands: then touched the bell.

"I'm afraid I've trespassed most unwarrantably upon your time: taken you away from your friends." Strang hesitated, fidgeting nervously.

"Not at all. You won't come in, I suppose?"

"No, no; good-evening, Mr. Simpson; and believe me I am infinitely obliged to you." He was drawing on his gloves as he spoke; and after a stiff little bow, had moved towards the door. There, however, he suddenly turned, and with short, hurried steps moved once more to Simpson's side and laid his hand on his arm.

"For God's sake, don't hurt her. Don't hurt her more than you can help — be hard upon her. She's a fine creature — a fine creature, a world too good for me! For I'm a lawyer to the bone! That's it, Simpson; that's it. And Heaven only knows why she should care. It makes me feel — makes me feel ashamed," he added. Then with bent head he walked to the door, which Jervis held open; leaving his host with a feeling of more real sympathy than, five minutes earlier, he could have thought possible.

## CHAPTER XVI

SIMPSON ACTS AS AN EMBASSY TO THE GIPSIES' CAMP; FINDING, IN HIMSELF, AN UNEXPECTED AFFINITY FOR VAGABONDAGE

It was with infinite reluctance that Simpson set out on his self-appointed task next morning: early that he might get it over all the sooner. He rode through Long Ilkley, quite uncheered by the bobbing curtsies of the children on their way to school; and passing between the double line of elms, turned up the grassy road, over which he had so often so idly puzzled: idly, I say; for with that sense of infinite time, which is an integral part of country life, he had always put off exploring it until some other day.

The grass was still green, with shimmering, wind-swept pools in every hollow and hoof-hole. But the hedges at either side, bare save for a few crimson berries, were a mass of deep madder-tinted twigs; the stubble-fields beyond them neutral; the sky grey, and the wind cold with the promise of snow.

It was a chilly morning — an unkind morning. The groom who brought round Simpson's grey cob had declared it as being "a greatcoat colder" than the day before: a morning when, as he felt, life was hard enough for every one — excepting the most

comfortably housed and fed. And here was he on his way to make it harder, and that for a woman; a task he abhorred from the very depth of his heart.

After a hundred yards or so the lane took a sudden twist, round the corner of which the grey shied violently; for almost immediately it widened out, in the fashion which Strang had described, and there right in front of them were the remains of the gipsies' camp.

Not only did the lane widen: it also dipped; and the caravan and cluster of brown tents which composed the camp — one a mere strip of canvas stretched between two thorn trees, beneath which sat a young woman crouching over a tiny fire, and suckling a baby — were pitched in a water-sodden hollow. The littered, down-trodden grass — showing whitish patches where other tents had stood — was pierced by coarse clumps of rushes, at which an ancient, yellowish white horse, with cut and swollen knees, pulled distastefully.

Two or three children, playing with empty tins among the puddles, ran to Simpson and begged in a practised whine; holding out red, chapped hands, rolling their dark eyes, and showing all their white teeth in a manner at once bold and ingratiating; until a flap of one of the tents was pulled aside and a harsh voice demanded: —

"Who's there?"

In a moment the children had drawn back, with their eyes slantwise on Simpson; while one — a girl

of about thirteen — laughed, put her finger to her lips, as if to ask him not to tell, and answered back in some unintelligible gibberish; at which the tent flap was pulled farther aside, and an old woman appeared in the opening.

"What are you seeking?" she demanded. With no preliminary greeting; and so evidently on her defence that Simpson wondered whether she suspected his errand. The next moment, however, he realised that something else oppressed her conscience, for when he asked for Merwin Smith her face at once cleared.

"She's gone along the wood, seeking a bit o' kindlin', for everything's sopping this weather," she answered. "One o' the brats shall call her. Off you go, Sarah"; and she signed to the tall girl; who, after a curious glance at the stranger, clambered over the gate at the back of the camp, and made her way up a sloping field towards a dark coppice, which crowned the top like a frowning brow.

"You've got a damp spot here," remarked Simpson, by way of passing the time. "I should have thought you could have found a better place for the winter."

"It's killin' me," responded the old woman complainingly. "It gets into my bones an' rots 'em. An' the people here, narrow an' graspin' and mean like the land, all grudging alike. An' the weather that cold that the hares be lying numb in the farrows o' nights, so there ain't no finding them. An'

all the withes for the baskets clean run out; an' the men devourin' themselves with fightin' an' quarrelling for sheer idleness." Her singsong voice ran on, with the monotonous sound of a dirge. "Merwin says, 'Wait till the spring. Wait till the spring,' says she. But she be young and lusty: the sap ain't got no power to rise in old bones that once be frooze. An' there's the West country, all bonny an' callin': an' we moulderin' here."

"Well, why don't you move West?" Simpson spoke hopefully, here at least was some one of his own way of wishing.

"It's Merwin"; the old crone came closer and, bent half double, peered up at him, with bleared eyes set in an incredibly wrinkled face. "You bain't the gentleman as comes arter 'er? No, no," she added hastily, as if conscious of her mistake: "you 're warm o' blood like the West: but he's thin and perishin' an' wantin' as the place he bides in. Well, so it be! Merwin's gotten a paramour" — she brought out the old Bible word quite naturally — "an' won't not go; an' the lads be wild an' won't not go without her. So here we all be; rottin' for the will o' a lass — as many a likely 'un has rotted afore now."

"What does her grandmother say? Are you —" Simpson hesitated over the unuttered question.

"No, no; she's along in there." She jerked her head in the direction of the caravan, of which the door was tightly shut, and the window curtains drawn — giving it an air of eyes and lips tight upon

some secret. "She was at the head of the tribe an' ruled us all. Now Merwin rules she. An' so it is: dead afore she's drawn her last breath."

"Well, why don't you go? How many are here?"

"There's my darter an' her son Sam, as is mad wild for Merwin. An' that girl as I sent searching just now, she be hers; an' another lad o' seven years or so. An' there's my brother's son, as has a wife of his own: she be there": and she jerked her head in the direction of the woman with the baby. "An' them other two children be his too. But here he'll bide, willy-nilly, where Merwin do bide. An' here be me, whose own love o' man flared out these twenty years back, tied by the leg with other folks' lusts. An' the uncle o' Merwin, as is a natural; an' her grandmother: all held here, for the will o' one lass, moonstruck by a whey-faced ninny. An' no trade doin'; an' all the folk castin' the strange eye at us, an' our bellies empty, an' our pipes out. But there it be, there it be." The half-chanted words held all the fatalism of a Greek chorus.

"Do you smoke?"

"Aye, when there's aught to smoke." A gleam of hope shot through the dolorous words.

"Hold up your hands." The old woman did as she was told; her dull eyes brightening as Simpson emptied his tobacco pouch into them.

"God bless you, my dear. An' yer lady, with her lil head like the ripe corn on the slender stalk."

Simpson laughed, though a sudden memory of a

fair face and slender white neck sent the blood pumping through his veins.

"You're mistaken, there's no lady for me," he protested. But the old woman had caught his look, and laughed.

"To come, to come," she said, screwing up her crafty eyes and peering into his face. "Ah, well, it's a fine thing where the blood's still fresh enough to be set leapin' by a word. It 'ud take more nor a word, nor a touch either, to set mine off, come these days. Though I can tell you this, my pretty gentleman —" and she chuckled knowingly — "time was when a touch —"

"Well, the best thing is for you to get away!" interposed Simpson hastily; took a sovereign out of his pocket and slipped it into her hand. "It will be better — believe me: better for every one."

"You're right there, if it's the girl you're thinking of. There's young Sam as is mad fur her: hot and strong with the blood o' her own people in his veins. Fur her own sake, too. What 'ud a hawk do mating with a white-faced louse, such as that yon is? She'll have a bit o' money, will Merwin. Mayhap he comes arter her for that, mayhap he's got wind o' that!" Her crafty face was alive with greed at the thought.

"No, I don't think he's after that: but it's all the more reason you should get her away and marry her to your grandson — if he's a good fellow and loves her," added Simpson with a sudden sense of com-

punction. For he had raised his head at the sound of a shout from the hillside, and looking up saw the young girl running: while behind her, walking slowly with her bare head very erect, came the woman who — nearly five months earlier — had sat at his table, drunk his wine, and wished him his heart's desire.

As she reached the locked gate, Simpson dismounted to help her.

But she sprang over it, with one hand on the top like a man, and without answering his greeting turned towards the old woman: "Go into your tent, Auntie Rachel; you and your tongue take too much exercise over minding my business for me; you'll be worn out afore your time. An' you, go!—" With a gesture she swept the child on one side, then flung round upon Simpson.

"Now, what is it?" she said, and stood facing him with challenging eyes.

"Will you walk down to the end of the lane with me? We can talk better." Simpson spoke with his usual gentle courtesy.

"Aye."

The girl turned by his side, and for a few minutes they moved on in silence, Simpson with one hand in the grey cob's mane, torturing himself as to what to say: hoping against hope that she would speak first.

But the road came in sight, and as still she had not uttered a word he stopped, and took his courage in both hands.

"I've seen — been talking to Mr. Strang. He told me he — he —" He hesitated, stammering.

The girl's eyes, half sullen, half frightened, were full upon him, her lips set in a scornful curve. But suddenly she trembled, and in the moment during which she struggled for self-control Simpson realised that she looked at once older and younger than she had done on the night he first saw her. More mature, more completely a woman; yet less independent, more childlike: as if for the first time she had felt fear, realised her dependence on others; though she still held her head high, and kept silence: so that again he plunged on, with a sense of desperation.

"Look here! Strang has told me about your — your friendship. He is awfully fond of you, but he is frightfully worried. You see, it can't go on; you see for yourself that it can't go on!" In his pity, and dislike for the task he had set himself, he spoke almost angrily.

"Why not?" The question came with a sharp jerk of the girl's chin.

"Because things like that never do. People can't be together, can't care for each other in the way you do, without there being the devil to pay in the end: that is, unless they marry. And then," he added with unusual cynicism, "it's often only a question of covering up the bad with the worse. But, believe me, I know what I am talking about. I don't know why it is: whether the law makes the wrong or the wrong makes the law. It's all a brutal business — but

there it is!" The fatalistic phrase of the old gipsy woman rose to his lips. "People won't hold together unless they're bound. It's not a question of right or wrong, it's human nature. And if they're not bound they must pretend they are, and you know — every one knows — the hopelessness of that. It always ends in the same way: in misery for both, and in most misery for the one who cares most. It's the lies and deception that tell on a man: I've seen them with their nerves fretted to fiddlestrings, and stronger men than Strang."

"Strang's all right."

"He may be all right, but he's not the man for that sort of life. Talk of stolen fruit being sweetest! That's a lie too — a lie that needs a host of other lies to support it."

"I'd not be afraid of a few lies for a man as I loved. Folks as asks questions, as comes interfering, deserves lies."

"I say! I'm sorry —" Simpson's unusual eloquence failed: he was suddenly oppressed by a sense of his own impertinence. "You think I'm a meddler — you're right there, and I can only say that I like it no better than you do. But as to lies; you have the — the imagination to lie well. But it's different with a —" he almost said "with a man," but caught himself up in time; "with Strang. He's always in fear of being found out. It poisons everything for him; would poison him against you in time."

"He loves me."

"As far as he knows how. But it wants something bigger than his love to set him free from the fear of public opinion. You can scarcely realise how completely this place is his whole world: how he lives by it, and for it: what its good opinion means to him."

Simpson had intended to offer the girl a bribe — his city-bred belief in the all-efficiency of money still holding — to raise the offer higher and higher: "within a certain limit," as Strang had said. But — with a curious sureness that he understood her better than her lover — he found himself talking to her as though she was his equal: apologising for, almost belittling, his friend: — "His whole interests are bred up in this place: he has n't the courage to face the whole thing out. It would need a very brave, a very independent man."

"To marry the likes of me?"

"Well, you know that." He spoke with sudden boldness, for it seemed the only way. "Look here, I don't try to humbug you. It's no question of one being better or worse than another — it's simply a question of custom and suitability. You know that it would require a good deal of strength on Strang's part to marry you. And even then, what would your life together be? He's not got only himself to consider, you know that?"

"Well, have I only myself to consider? He has his people; but I have my people too. An' they're more to me than his are to him; for our blood is warmer nor his. He has his home an' his country,

but my people *are* my home an' country. You reckon it's all him bending to me, a'cause I live in the open, go barefooted, wild among the wild: outside law or pale. But my people thinks it's me bending to him a'cause he's a Gorgio: tame an' set, an' more unlearned in all my ways than I am in his. What's a Strang?" she spoke with supreme scorn. "What's those thin-lipped, flat-breasted sisters o' his, an' that cold-eyed mother o' his? I've seen 'em," she went on defiantly. "I'm not too proud to watch outside o' the window o' nights, to peep a'hind hedges. What are the likes o' them to the Smiths: the Pátuléngro, as our folks name us? There's my grandmother's close on a hundred, an' her grandmother a hundred a'fore she died, an' her grandmother a'fore her. An' alway they tell back of the time when we was kings o' Egypt. You count it shame for the like o' me to mate with the likes o' him: my folks count the shame for me."

"There's no shame either way. But, look here, Merwin, you know, it would be fire and water. Strang's a nice enough chap, but he's —" Simpson drew himself up sharply. "Why, you yourself said how different you are, how far apart."

"By birth an' upbringing, mayhap. But there's love a'tween us: love such as you've never heard tell of. An' that'll mix us — time an' for all."

"It might do with some. But custom's stronger than most people. Strang's swaddled in custom and you know it. Somewhere in the bottom of your

heart you know it. He's not a big enough man to throw his cap over the windmill. After a while all sorts of things would begin to count first."

"He's a little man 'cause he's never felt the warmth o' life — a wee white man, kept in a cellar away from all the sunshine o' life: with a little soul an' a little heart," said the girl softly.

"You know that! Then why — ?"

"'Cause he's mine. There's no knowin' why; no more than there's any knowin' why there's rain one day an' shine the next."

They had come to the end of the lane. And now, having turned up the road from Long Ilkley, stood in the middle of it, talking as if it were summer; though the wind, thinly white with hail, blew them all on one side; and Simpson shivered, while the cob half turned, and stood with its nose tucked in the bend of his arm, its tail between its legs.

But the girl faced it erectly, the neck of her loose blouse open, her head bare. A couple of labourers passed them and turned to stare; but she took no notice.

"From the first night I set eyes on him I knew — an' he knew. He has told me that; he knew an' was afeared. It turned him cold, he said — but to me it was like a scorching fire over a field o' stubble.

"He were so different to my own people," she went on, her voice softening to a tender undertone. "The long white hands of him, and the high white forehead. Mayhap it was the difference as drew me,

an' the gentleness of him; an' the sort o' fear o' life, where others be taking with both hands, reckless an' drunken, an' bellowing o' their desire, for all the world to hear — an' him so clean an' penikitty an' white. When I lay my hand aside his, one 'ud think as I was the man, he the woman."

"There, you see what it is — he's not man enough for you. Merwin, you know he's not."

"There's some as 'ud feel like that. There's small feckless women, weak, as wants some one to hold to. But there's that o' the man, or the mother, in me, as makes me need some one as wants caring for — maybe that's it. But there's no knowing what it be, save that we're mates. An' all of him that's man is o' my makin'," she added fiercely; "an' all o' life that he knows is o' my giving. It's I as runs warm in his veins; as taught him all that a woman means — beyond the cookin' o' victuals, mindin' o' a house."

"And now, where is it going to end?"

"It'll end —" suddenly the girl's face grew peaked and wan. "Do you reckon I don't see as how it's goin' to end, bein' as I am? It 'ull end in pain an' in sorrow; as all such joy do. But there it is, 't were none o' my seekin'."

"Well, why let it end like that? It will only be harder to bear as time goes on. Why not end it now? You're strong enough and big enough: why not go away; end it for yourself in your own way?"

"He'd follow the call o' my blood."

"I think not." Simpson's pitying eyes met the

girl's fully; saw a fear that what he said was true creep into them, and turned from the sight. "Go now. Now he'll be sorry for your going; instead of being sorry, for all time, that you stayed: think of you with regret and affection. It would be the bigger part: better than to drag on here and watch a man grow tired of you."

"He'd die with frettin' — die for the sheer need o' me. He's not one as 'ud take up with any loose woman."

"Perhaps not: but for all that, he'll die if you stay. If you'd seen him last night — torn to pieces with regrets and fears."

"Why?" — the girl's eyes were wide. "Ain't lovin' an' matin' nature to us? — The very beast knows that."

"Nothing's natural to a man who has been brought up, lived as he has: it's a sort of agony to him."

"He's not happy. No, I know he's not happy. He's allus afeared — afeared o' some'ut." And she struck her hands together with a gesture, half of despair, half of exasperation. "But then love is fearsome — terrible, love such as ours be," she went on defiantly. "An' I reckoned it wur as the birth-pain to a woman, that he wur getting his manhood. But there it be."

"And now you must go, if you love him. Away from here, out of his life."

"Did he tell you to say that?" The girl's voice broke sharply, as she leant forward and stared at

Simpson, through the mist of snow, into which the hail had now thickened. "He told you to tell me to go?"

"He said it would be easier for him — that he could forget better if you went. He said I was to tell you that if there was any way in which I could help you — anything to do — give you which would make it easier —"

"What do you mean by that?" Her voice grew suddenly harsh, as she leant forward and peered into Simpson's face.

"If there was any expense of moving and all that —" he blurted out; a ludicrous picture of pantechnicons loaded with furniture passing through his mind. Strang had been a fool, and worse, to suggest such a thing as money — but he felt himself bound to repeat the offer. "I was to tell you that he'd be only too glad to help — to —"

"To buy off my love! By God, that's enough! I'll not go, I'll stay! I'll go after him toe on heel. I'll point to him as the man who never dared to be a man till I learned him. I'll tell his mother an' his sisters of all there's been atween us: how the stream as they dammed up came to burst: an' the greed an' the lust o' him, when once he tasted love. To pay me! To offer me money to go — I that was as mother an' wife to him!" She caught her hands together and beat at her breast in a sort of fury. "What 'ud they say, they of my tribe, to know I'd been given the go-by? Sam 'ud put his foot upon his

neck, as I once seen him do to a man as was too free with me — an' I'd be glad to see it done to him. An' Dan, too, an' Uncle Dimitri, the hunchback, as has arms like an ape. There's not one as 'ud pass by an' leave him if they so much as guessed. But I'll be even with him myself; an' I'll not go — an' I'll not go! You can tell him that. If he was to offer me all the gold o' the Queen o' Sheba, I'd not go."

"Then you never loved him."

The girl laughed harshly — "What does a little, round, pot-bellied, old man like you know o' love?" she asked scornfully.

"This much: that a woman who has once loved a man never wants to see him suffer."

"Suffer!" she mocked.

"Yes, suffer. If you'd seen him last night you'd have realised how he has suffered. What's the good of trying to squeeze a quart of wine into a pint ginger-beer bottle?" he went on, speaking as crudely as the girl had done. "It's not his fault that he's not made to hold more; it's your fault for not having known better. But if you don't care, there's nothing to be done."

"I reckon the fault is that I've cared overmuch."

"But not in the right way."

"I'll not go!" Merwin reiterated sullenly.

"I think you will; you've too much pride to stay where you're not wanted."

"I'll stay to please myself."

"If you stay, I believe he'll kill himself. Don't you

realise he's not the man to stand this sort of thing? By God, I believe that you'll have his death at your door."

Merwin drew back a little and folded her arms round herself with a shiver. "I'll go," she said dully. "Auntie Rachel's right; it's cold here — it bites to the bone — yes, I'll go."

"When?"

"You 're mighty impatient: but that don't matter — nothing matters. I'll go to-night. I an' my people, my Granny an' Auntie Rachel; an' Dan an' Dan's wife an' babies, an' the young girl an' Sam an' the hunchback. All the filthy common folk, as has stunk in the nostrils of them yonder;" she laughed drearily, with an impatient gesture in the direction of Long Ilkley: — "All the filthy crew — as was kings — aye, kings afore *they* was out o' the mud as had spawned 'em." And she turned, wrapping her arms round her like a cloak.

"I'm sorry, Merwin," Simpson felt the utter inadequacy of the words; but the girl had vanished in the thickening snow, and after waiting and listening for a moment he clambered wearily onto his pony's back and rode home: shivering and infinitely depressed.

"It's a damned rotten world," he complained huskily to Finch, who found him next day crouching over the fire in his own room, almost inarticulate with a heavy cold. "And of all fool games, the worst of all is interfering with other people's affairs."

"More particularly love affairs," remarked Finch sagely. "Blowing hot one moment and cold the next. By Jove, George, but you 've got the benefit of the latter, to judge by after effects. As for Strang — Strang 's an ass."

"What the devil do you know about it?"

"Every one knows, down to the smallest model who comes to sit to me between school hours. Strang! of all people, and with that jolly primitive crew! Though, by Jove, the Ilkley people have got their knives into them."

"Why?"

"Because they don't dare to do what the gipsies do — namely, poach. So they're literally bursting with indignation on our account. That's the funniest thing, on our account — ours! Think of it, George! We who have simply paid for the right to poach on other people's land! But the feudal feeling is very strong in this dear old country of ours."

"And cheap," added Simpson bitterly. "Good God! Finch," he went on with a sudden memory of the gipsy girl, of her wealth of passionate love: — "it's awful to think of the waste of feeling: of the narrowness — the humbug."

"And the skim milk and water dribbled into the fine old bottles, meant to hold the wine of human passion. By Jove, George, I shall never forget the look of that girl the night she came here. I only wish she 'd given me the chance Strang got. But she did n't, worse luck — would n't as much as look at me."

## CHAPTER XVII

### GILBERT STRANG FLINGS HIS BLACK BOWLER OVER THE WINDMILL

LATE on the evening of the same day that Simpson and Merwin had talked together, a dismal cortège toiled slowly through the thickening snow, up the steep incline from Long Ilkley: passed by Little Ilkley and pushed on: up the rise towards the forked roads, where the bibulous cab-driver had drawn rein, some eight months earlier.

But now there was no hint of distance visible: even the high hedge at either side of the road was lost to view: while the lantern hanging in front of the gipsies' van flickered like a drunken eye through the thick cloud of steam, flecked with snowflakes, which hung over the old grey's back.

Behind the van came a spring cart, its broken shaft roughly patched with a sapling. This was drawn by a drooping chestnut pony, and piled high with tents and household utensils, upon which sat the two younger women — Dan's wife, with her baby in her arms, and the elder children crouched whimpering beside her — while Sarah walked at the pony's head; and Dan himself stumbled and cursed along the

hedgeside, with a gun on his arm and a couple of yellow curs at his heels.

Inside the caravan rode Auntie Rachel, with the other old woman, once Queen of the tribe, now a senile, mumbling wreck; while the hunchback perched on the step at the rear, among a swinging cluster of pots and pans — his shoulders higher than ever, in his efforts to keep warm — his hands tucked down inside the tops of his trousers. And Sam crouched on the front board: bending forward, peering into the gloom — the reins held lightly in his hands — chirruping encouragement to the stumbling beast between the shafts.

A hundred yards behind walked Merwin. She had wrapped a shawl tightly round her, pulling it pentwise over her head, and pressed forward doggedly against the wind: her mouth set in a hard line, her eyes burning. Auntie Rachel had been right — it was an ill place to live in; an ill, grasping place to get away from.

There was nothing left. She had scattered the ashes herself: the place should be bare of her and hers. If the sun shone in the morning, and Strang went to seek her, he would find nothing — perhaps suffer as she did. She did not care one way or the other. Dimitri had stuck pins into a toad and buried it in the Strang's family grave at the last full moon: he had told her that while they were drawing the tent-stakes, guessing something had gone wrong, thinking it would please her. But she did not care

one way or the other. The Strangs might all be dead as far as she was concerned. Nothing mattered: ever would matter again.

How the women had clacked and chattered over the sudden move: but the men had done as she asked them without a word. They understood her, were of her blood; would kill Strang for her if she wished. But she no longer cared: had already felt too much that day. All she wanted was to reach Burlaps, where there was an old camping-ground; to creep into the van beside her grandmother and sleep; for she was conscious of no feeling beyond an infinite weariness.

Presently she imagined she heard some one calling and stopped: then went on — thinking it was only a peewit: stopped again as it sounded more distinctly; and saw the light of a lantern come tilting up the hill towards her. Then, with a sudden wild rush of blood through her veins — like the coming to life of some one already dead — she heard her own name.

"Merwin! Merwin!" And in a swinging circle of light she saw Strang staggering towards her.

He must have come straight from his business, for he was all in black; a tightly fitting black overcoat, and a bowler hat on the back of his head, in strange contrast to his tortured face.

"Merwin! Merwin! Oh, thank God!" He caught at her arm and pressed against her, trembling from head to foot. "I was at my office, I left early: I was horribly frightened at what I'd done." He pulled out

his handkerchief and wiped it over his forehead, which was running with sweat. "What are we to do? — God only knows what we're to do. But when I got to the camp and found you gone — everything white, even the place where the fire had been — I went mad, and I've run — run all the way."

"Why did you come?" The girl spoke harshly, though, with a movement of instinctive tenderness, she had flung out an arm to support him.

"I don't know — it's beyond me." He spoke almost pettishly. "All the day my blood's been calling for you — but I promised Simpson."

"The little man — that good little man? You told him to buy me off."

"I don't know what he said — he twisted my meaning."

"No. He knew me better than you did — he told me a'cause you'd bidden him."

"What was I to do, Merwin? What was I to do? God knows I wanted to do right; to make it easier for you."

"Well, I'm going now; you're quit o' me." And she half-turned. But this time it was Strang who flung his arms round her, with the sudden strength of despair.

"I can't let you go! That's why I'm here. All the day it's been growing on me. When I left the office I walked to the camp, but when I found you gone, I ran. I asked every one on the way, I did n't care who knew — I ran like a dog! And now, what's

to be done?" He fell a little back and stared at her vacantly, as if half dazed by physical exhaustion and stress of feeling.

"Go back, Gilbert Strang; go home to your mammy and your lady sisters."

"But I can't go back! I can't go back! Every one saw me, would know; they're all talking about it: sitting over their tea talking by now — don't I know their ways? Besides" — here he suddenly veered, with all the indecision of a weak man: "I can't settle to my work, I can't do anything. I thought it would be better if you went — but now I know differently. Perhaps if you were near and I could always go to you, it would be easier. What do you think, eh, Merwin? My dear, my dear, how warm your breast is in this cold. God! how I love you and need you."

"Stand back a little an' tell me. Why have you come?"

"Because I tried to do what was impossible — to let you go. But I can't — I tried, for both our sakes. For yours, too, Merwin; I swear it, for I know I'm a poor sort of fellow; you'd be better without me."

"Well, *now*."

"If the rest of them were to go on, and you lived somewhere in Addley; it's larger than Market Charlford, and I'm often there on business — no one would know. After a little people would forget I'd run after you; think I wanted to speak with one of your men — some point of law."

"And pretend we were naught to each other." The memory of Simpson's words flashed through the girl's mind: all the misery and inevitable disillusionment which he declared that deception brings in its train. "No, I'll not do it. Go home, Strang, go back to your own people, an' let me go to mine."

"No, no! Never, I'll shoot myself first. I'll shoot myself if you go."

"It's the only way, my rei, the only way left. Let me go, or I'll call to Dan on ahead."

"I won't let you go!" He caught her as she turned, and holding her tightly, with her shawl twisted round her, bent back her head and kissed her again and again upon the lips. "That's life! How can I let you go, my woman, my woman! I'll marry you, anything, to have you, to keep you."

The girl pushed him a little back, and peered at him desperately, her hands upon his breast.

"I can't trust you."

"But I will — I can't go back alone. I'll go with you; we'll be married at Burlaps. They'll get used to it, take it for granted, once we're married. My mother and sisters will put you in their ways. It's the best thing, the only thing now."

"You may follow if you will." With a proud toss of her head Merwin shook herself free from his arm, turned and walked ahead of him; her eyes swimming in tears, fixed straight in front of her.

For a while they moved on in silence: miserably

enough, with a full yard between them. Then he pushed on a little and touched her arm.

"How far is it to Burlaps?"

"A matter of three miles now." She answered shortly.

"We may as well walk together, since we're going to be together the rest of our lives."

Without a word Merwin slackened her pace and he drew to her side. Then again, after a moment or two's silence, he touched her arm; slipped his own inside it; and, his passion revived by the human contact, pressed close against her shoulder.

"Merwin, we have only ourselves; let us be happy. We'll make our own world; not care what other people think; only love me."

"I do love you."

"I know that, and when we are married —"

Suddenly she turned to him and flung her arm round his shoulder, encompassing him with a warm rush of human love. "Marry me soon, soon, man," she whispered, her voice broken, the hot tears streaming down her face. "I'd never have told you, only you spoke the word yourself: would never have asked. But marry me soon, soon, Gilbert Strang; for there's a child o' yours beneath my heart, an' we'll be needin' you sore."

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE NEWS OF THE SECOND DESERTER REACHES THE CLUB, AND BANKS'S YOUNG LOVE IS TEMPORARILY NIPPED IN THE BUD

DESMOND, frozen out from his own sanctum, which faced into the very teeth of the wind, had brought his writing down to the library. That was at two o'clock. Now it was close on five, and not a single word had been spoken. Not that Simpson wanted to talk; for his brain felt thick and woolly; his chest was sore with coughing. Besides which he was feeling out of tune with the world: out of tune even with Fountains: an unseemly blot on the beauty of the place: very old and very much a failure.

Mrs. Bliss had insisted on swathing his throat with flannel: there was a mysterious draught from somewhere, and he sat huddled together with a rug drawn over his shoulders. It was unthinkable, that life should ever again hold any possible romance; and with a groan — which caused even the absorbed Desmond to raise his head — he visualised the slim, rounded neck and white shoulders of the lady of his dreams: confronted with such a contrast that the corners of his mouth drooped, his pleasant face sagged into lines of infinite dejection. There might

come a time when he would realise that all mortals are subject to occasional colds — that even a goddess may, perchance, be reduced to sniffing — but at present the thought was far from him, and life seemed uncommonly dismal.

Presently Finch and Gale came home from shooting, and Jervis brought the tea, arranging the tray with fussy minuteness; placed a little table by Simpson's side with his own special large cup: then, hesitating a little, on pretence of tidying the littered room, gravitated towards Finch, who was always ready to listen to gossip of a sufficiently pungent nature: stooped to pick up a pair of gloves, and remarked in a low voice: —

"Did you hear as how Mr. Strang was back, sir?"

"Strang! I did n't know he had gone away!"

Jervis coughed deprecatingly and again stooped, this time to gather some of Desmond's scattered papers.

"After that there gipsy lot, sir."

"Jervis! damn you! Why can't you leave my stuff alone?" broke in Desmond angrily. "I'd just got it all sorted out."

"Beg pardon, sir — I thought as how it was on the floor —"

"That's where it was meant to be. All right, give it to me now." And he took the loose sheets from the man; laid them on the top of another pile, and sat tapping with the end of his pen on the blotting-paper: his black brows bent, his wide grey eyes

struggling to follow the unfinished thought, which the others had broken in upon.

"Well, what about Mr. Strang, — eh, Jervis?" asked Finch, moving over to the fire, and standing with his back to it, his cup in his hand.

The man hesitated. He had meant to tell his story in a low aside to Finch, leave him to repeat it, and was confused by the sudden publicity: caught Simpson's watery eye full upon him, and stammered: "It's nothing, sir, nothing of any importance."

"Come on, get out with it," urged Finch.

"Please, sir." Jervis looked at Simpson, to whom the servants had one and all accorded the position of absolute master. "It seems as yesterday week when the gipsies left Long Ilkley, Mr. Strang he followed them. A dreadful state he was in, too, from all accounts, askin' every one he met which way they was gone; folks reckoned he'd got a sort o' case against them for all this poaching as they tells of: or else the wench as he was carryin' on with — excusin' your presence, sir — had made off with his watch."

"I don't see that what other people think has anything to do with *your* story," put in Simpson huskily.

"No, sir, I beg pardon, sir. For as it turns out he was after her, to marry her. An' did, by special license an' all, at Burlaps: telegraphing home to say as how he was kept away on business. Went to

Brighton, sir, honeymooning. An' only yesterday evening walked in upon Mrs. Strang and the young ladies with the gipsy wench at his heels."

"Good Lord! married her? Well, he'll have his hands full; what a marriage!" exclaimed Finch.

"Jolly lucky to get such a wife," put in Gale: "a miserable specimen like that. A fine girl, a girl who has lived in the open; that's the way to keep fit. I only wish—" he spoke half bitterly, half enviously, his prominent cheek-bones dashed with a bright spot of colour — then broke off coughing; a hard rasping sound, very different from Simpson's throaty cough.

"Jervis." It was Simpson who spoke, and the man jumped to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"You know that Mr. Strang was a member of this Club."

"Yes, sir."

"I say was, because the fact of his being married prevents him from belonging to it any longer; though it does not prevent him coming here whenever he pleases, and remaining our friend. And remember this: any disrespectful mention of Mrs. Gilbert Strang in the servants' hall will mean disrespect to me — to all of us" — he glanced round at the other men, who nodded gravely: "and to our friend. I believe that's the motor; see if it's Mr. Banks come back — and Mr. Parrifleet — Mr. Parrifleet's room ready, eh?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jervis, and departed, only too glad to be gone.

The next moment Banks billowed into the room — his broad face crimson, puffing and blowing as though he had raced his own excitement: while Parrifleet slid in behind him, nodded to the others, and with his usual air of detached ease slipped into a chair by Simpson's side; then sat gazing into the fire as though he had been there for months.

"What do you think of this now? Good Lord!" burst out Banks: — "think of those poor things! Pretty state of affairs, — eh, what?"

"What poor things — who have you run over now, Banks? You'll be getting your license taken away from you if you don't look out," remarked Finch.

"Do you mean to say you don't know? Wait a moment till Jervis has gone — does n't do to talk of those sort of things before servants, — eh, what? Do you mean to tell me you don't know?" he went on, as the man left the room: straddling across the hearth; beating up the entire circle into a species of whirlpool, of which he himself was, as usual, the centre. "That poor old Mrs. Strang! Those poor girls! Awful misfortune for them: fellows 'ull fight shy of the family now; spoilt their chances, — tut, tut! And Strang! Strang, of all people!"

"I always knew there was something desperate about him," put in Finch sarcastically.

"Well, by Jove, he's done for himself now. What

do you think? Married, actually married!" Banks having thrown his bomb gazed round at them all, his protruding eyes opened to their widest, his cheeks puffed out. "Married!"

"Unprecedented villainy!"

"And to whom! By God, Simpson, the selfishness of some people. If it had n't been for — for my previous experience, if I had n't learnt to do nothing rashly, I might be brother-in-law, mark you! — well, not exactly, but sort of ways brother-in-law — to a gipsy. A gipsy! What do you think of that now! *That* girl! actually that girl who came here the night of your confounded dinner, Simpson"; and he turned a denouncing eye upon his friend. "That damned dinner! I was always against it, and I was right! That was the beginning of it all, actually the beginning of it all."

"Of what?" enquired Finch blandly.

"Good Lord! have n't you been listening to what I said? But I suppose it's nothing to you, with your beastly Socialistic ideas, that Strang should go and disgrace himself by marrying a gipsy. Rather clever, Bernard Shawish, — eh, what? The only wonder is that you had n't heard about it, Simpson; first thing we heard. Every one talking of it at the station, — eh, what, Parrifleet?"

"Yes."

"I don't see what there's to make all this fuss about — a fine healthy girl. Talk of eugenics —" began Gale.

"No one talks of eugenics unless they've got a bee in their bonnet," interrupted Banks. "A disgusting subject I call it, — eh, what?"

"Matrimony's like ripe cheese; it won't bear looking into too closely," remarked Finch.

"What a story it would make — " put in Desmond. "Not a novel; it would n't run to that, — at least, I don't think so, — but a thing of about fifty thousand words; for the Cerise Library or something like that."

"Well, what are they going to live on, — eh, what?" demanded Banks. "People won't trust a fellow like that with their affairs. If he can't manage his own, he won't be likely to manage theirs. You'll have to look into things a bit, Simpson."

"By Jove, it would be worth seeing. That pagan woman in the Strang's museum of antiquities," cried Finch. "I'll go over and call; will you come, Banks?"

"Better not, — eh, what? One does n't want to get mixed up in that sort of thing, you know. What, my third cup? Oh, well, on an occasion like this: when you think of the news I've brought, I deserve it — eh, what?"

"I'll come, Finch. Copy — you know — fine contrast — uncommon situation!" put in Desmond.

With a sudden movement George Simpson rose, and pulled his rug about his shoulders. Then he stood for a moment and surveyed them; his heavy

chin thrust forward, his genial face almost savage in its scorn.

"What a lot of cads you all are! You, Banks, frisking round anything in petticoats, like mutton dressed lamb. And you, Finch, with your talk of art and ideals — and Desmond, pretending to realise the — the" — he stammered a little over the unusually poetical expression — "deeper things of life, and all that rot. Here's a fine woman with a heart and a soul, and feelings like the rest of us — a jolly sight more if the truth was known. And a man that has dared to do the straight thing — take the reins in his own hands for once in his life — and you cackling and pecking like a lot of old hens over a muckheap." His voice broke huskily, and he moved towards the door, one corner of the rug trailing behind him. Then he turned again, his face purple over the scarlet flannel.

"Fingering over other people's lives as though they were a jig-saw puzzle," he spluttered furiously, and slammed the door behind him: opened it again to release an imprisoned corner of the fringed rug: choked over a devout "damn," and was gone.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A GIPSY IN VILLADOM; AND THE SUFFERING CONSEQUENT UPON FORCING SQUARE PEGS INTO ROUND HOLES

It seems as if the human soul and mind is endued with a certain focus — in much the same fashion as the human eye — which renders nothing so nerve-racking, and so difficult, as the continuous effort to change the habitual way of looking at life, and all that appertains to it.

Merwin Strang was long-sighted: she saw everything in the large, clearly and coarsely: she thought and felt, loved and hated in the large.

The intricate machinery of domestic life was a mystery to her: meals merely meant something to eat; and she would as lief as not sleep in the open, upon the bare ground, with a rug around her. Time was measured by night or day, spring, autumn, winter, summer; and she realised nothing of the tyranny of hours and minutes — breakfast at a quarter to nine; lunch at a quarter-past one, tea at half-past five; set times for going to bed and getting up. All apparently fixed by unalterable laws, for which there seemed no special reason.

She felt as though she was in a tangle of cobwebs;

each thread fine as air, yet hampering her every step.

In addition to this, and even more difficult to bear, was the realisation that all the things on which she had prided herself — counted as her best assets — were worse than useless; even regarded as drawbacks: her magnificent health, and strength of lung and muscle, the swiftness with which she could run, the distance her voice would carry. Even the accomplishments which she had imagined as being dear to the heart of all Gorgios — sweeping, cooking, washing — were not allowed; nothing more than a little dusting: the exasperating fiddling over what she regarded as absolutely useless rubbish; old china and such like, only fit for the rubbish-heap.

Strang, with all the curious bravado of a weak and timid man, had not announced the marriage till he and his wife walked in upon Mrs. Strang and her daughters; sitting at their tea in the dining-room, where they always took it when alone.

With most people there would have been a furious scene, in which the young wife would have felt more or less at home. But neither then nor at any other time was there anything of the sort, save one-sided storms of Merwin's raising.

She was merely invited to sit down and take tea; while Lydia was bidden to tell Mary to light a fire in the spare room, and get the groom to help carry up Mrs. Gilbert's box: a decent trunk with a few simple clothes in it which Strang had chosen at Brighton.

"You must forgive my not putting you straight into the front room," said the old lady; "if my son had been pleased to give me a little notice, acquainted me with his marriage — not that I am complaining; he is of age, the house is his own, and I am not accustomed to any consideration from my own family — I would have had it ready for you. But by to-morrow I shall have moved all my things: you must excuse me for this one night."

"Oh, don't you mind — I'll do fine anywhere," protested the bride. She glanced piteously across the table towards her husband, saw that his head was bent over his plate; then turned towards the two sisters-in-law, to be met by a blank, irresponsive stare, the result — in Lydia's case — of mere amazement and fright, and again murmured something about "doin' anywhere."

"I was merely explaining," remarked Mrs. Strang coldly. "Will you take something more — no? Then if you have finished, perhaps you would like to see your room. Lydia, please to show Mrs. Gilbert to her room."

Lydia obeyed: lit a candle in the hall; a faint point of light reflected dimly in the yellow marbled walls, polished floor and mahogany, just touching as she moved the stuffed birds in their shining glass cases, stiffer than any birds Merwin had ever seen. After a little she began to feel like one of them herself: to wonder if her own eyes had grown as vacant and staring.

When they reached the bedroom, Lydia glanced round in an embarrassed manner, as if not knowing what to say. Then her eye caught the box.

"I see Mary's unstrapped your valise. You have candles — towels — soap? No, no soap; how stupid of Mary!" she said, as if relieved at finding something to do; and disappeared in search of it, returning with two cakes.

"Gilbert likes brown Windsor best, but I like violet, so I brought you one of each. I'm afraid it will be very uncomfortable for you without a dressing-room; but — but —" she hesitated a moment, and flushed all over her pretty faded face, then darted forward her head and kissed the new-comer — a pecking salute on the cheek: the only sort of kiss any Strang had ever known till Merwin herself taught Gilbert Strang what life could mean: —

"I hope you won't mind Mamma's manner. We are all a little afraid of Mamma; at least, Gilbert and I are; Emma's different. But she means to be kind — you must believe she means to be kind."

"Aye," said Merwin: standing before the fireplace, gazing down into the crackling flames with sombre, too far-seeing eyes.

"Anyhow," — Lydia spoke quickly, and almost in a whisper, as if afraid of being heard. "It's his house, you'll be mistress here: and if Gilbert loves you —"

"That's all I want," the young wife flung round

with a fierce gesture of her hands, from which the other shrank back with a little frightened movement. "Any one may be mistress here, so far as I care. What is a house but bricks and mortar? It's love as makes a home. Nothing don't matter as long as we have each other: ourselves an' our love, that's all we're needing — his home my arms by night, my heart by day; that's home to him. An' for me, love — love — an' the hope 'neath my heart."

Lydia, half out of the door, trembled and flushed. "Supper's not till eight," she said: "you'll have time to rest. You need n't even commence to get tidied till a quarter to: we don't dress; sometimes just change our blouses, that's all."

Closing the door, she groped her way across the dark landing, — for Mrs. Strang was sparing of lights: then hesitated at the top of the stairs, panting a little as though physically, as well as mentally, breathless. It had seemed indelicate in that house — where her brother had always lived as a bachelor — even to show his wife into a double-bedded room: she had stammered and grown hot over the very mention of the dressing-room; but she felt she ought to explain; they always did when her Uncle James and his wife came to stay, though they knew the capacity of the little house to a nicety.

But this creature was different. How she had flung wide her arms — with that inexplicable gesture as if drawing some one to her by the whole force of her being; and said out loud — so loud that the

servants might have heard if they had been on the landing — "my arms by night."

It was awful. Lydia felt as if she had been scorched; while her heart beat more fiercely than it had ever done before. Though at the same time she was conscious of a wonder whether, after all, some such feeling was not only natural and real — to other people besides this wild gipsy woman — but sweeter, far sweeter, than anything she had ever known.

Left alone in the prim room, — with the innumerable china trays on the dressing-table, the faded photographs and texts in cork frames on the wall, — Merwin stood for a moment or so gazing into the fire, thinking backwards and forwards. Then, feeling intolerably oppressed and caged, she moved to the window, pulled back the curtains and flung it wide open.

There was still the world outside: the good wide world: the clear frosty sky: the stars.

Beneath her window shone the lights of Market Charlford. And far away in the distance was another cluster of lights which she knew to be Long Ilkley. And behind that a shallow hill topped with a fringe of trees: the hill beneath which the gipsies' camp had once stood.

For a while she leant out, breathing in the clear air with great deep breaths, yearning towards the open. Then, with an air of great resolution, a stern tightening of her lips, she drew back: shut the win-

dow: pulled to the curtains, and opening her box began to take the things out and lay them in the drawers. Her wandering days were over.

Only as she reached the bottom: found a small parcel, done up in tissue paper, and, seating herself on the edge of the bed, opened it, did her face soften. And for a while she sat gently smoothing out the fragile contents — a tiny baby's cap of delicate lace — which she had seen in Brighton and bought and hidden away, so that even Gilbert might not see it.

Meanwhile, down in the dining-room Emma locked away the tea-caddy and jam: hesitated a moment; then, in answer to a gesture from her mother, laid down the key on the table before her, and left the room.

Ever since Strang entered the house his mother had maintained silence towards him, though addressing Merwin with a thin, sub-acid courtesy.

Now, he pushed back his chair, moved over to the mantelpiece, and, leaning one arm upon it, cleared his throat while his eyes searched the old lady's impassive face. At last Mrs. Strang spoke; lifting the heavy bunch of keys: weighing them for a moment in her hands: and then laying them again upon the table.

"Those are all the keys — if Mary stays she will show your wife where they belong: not that I expect her to stay, she has been used to gentlefolk. The books are on my writing-table, paid up to this last Monday."

"That does n't matter now, Mamma, — there's plenty of time to see about all that," stammered Strang.

"I wish everything to be left in order. There'll be no time to-morrow."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I and your sisters will be going to your Uncle James's by the ten o'clock train, since you have been pleased to turn us out of the house."

"I've done nothing of the sort!" protested her son. "I am only too anxious to — to arrange matters," he began again.

But the old lady had risen without another word; and was turning to leave the room when Strang, conscience-stricken at what he had done, caught at her arm. "Mamma, don't take it like that. I know I was wrong; I ought to have told you — but there were reasons."

"I have no wish to know your reasons. Take your hand away from my arm, please. And I must ask you and your wife to excuse my appearance at supper to-night. I have a great deal to see to. In fact, it would be better to bid you good-bye now — and I hope you won't repent. That's the best I can say for you, that I hope you won't repent."

"Look here, Mamma; I can't let you go like this. Merwin would be the last to wish it. At least stay a little till we can arrange something. You would feel differently in a few days — would get to" — the word "love" rose to Strang's lips; but it had never

been used in this family, which knew no feeling that it expressed, and he substituted the more familiar "like" — "like Merwin. I am sure you would like her. She is so warm-hearted, so — so" — he stumbled, searching his mind for some trait of his wife's which might appeal to her — "so genuine — honest."

"I am glad you believe her an honest woman — from what I heard I gathered the contrary."

"What did you hear?"

"I never repeat gossip."

"You guessed — suspected."

"I guessed that it needed a fool like you to make an honest woman of her."

"Then, by God! you guessed wrong." Strang flamed out in sudden defiance. "I've done her more harm than good."

"In any case, she has been the cause of the first oath that I've ever heard cross your lips. There is no need to make a vulgar scene. I do not expect to be considered, but I would ask you to remember that my heart is not equal to such things. And now I will wish you good-night: perhaps you will be so good as to let Baines drive the luggage to the station in the morning."

"Mother, I can't let you go like this. There must be some settlement; some business arrangement —" he hesitated, flushing, not liking even to mention money to this despotic woman who had always held the purse-strings, which were by right his. For Gilbert Strang, senior, rebelling at the last moment

against that feminine tyranny which made his home a prison to him, had left all he owned to his son.

"You should have thought of that before." Mrs. Strang had taken out her sewing, while Emma put the things away, and now stood tapping gently on the table with her thimble.

"Why should you go — why should anything be changed?" began Strang desperately. "After all, why should n't you all be very happy together, once you shook down, got used to each other?" With a sense of inevitable defeat Strang felt that he was throwing overboard every decision to which he had been steeling himself during the short honeymoon: but still he plunged on: —

"There is nothing to prevent it — room for all."

"I 'll not stay in any house where I am not mistress," declared Mrs. Strang: with an air of such invincible decision that it never even occurred to her son to ask what she would be at his Uncle James's.

"But why change anything?" With a sudden plunge Gilbert made the last fatal concession: "Why should not you keep on the housekeeping? You understand it. Merwin is very young, very inexperienced; I 'm sure she 'd be only too glad — it would leave her more time — freedom."

For a moment or so Mrs. Strang hesitated: still tapping with her thimble, a sound which eat into Strang's nerves; paralysing all thought, all faculty for looking forward; banishing from his mind everything he had meant to say. She had no intention of re-

linquishing her position, of being defeated. She knew her son too well to fear that: realised his weakness, with the bitter scorn small-minded persons feel for any one they can bully. But still it would not do to appear too eager.

"On one condition I will do as you ask me," she said at last. "There is to be a perfectly clear understanding: you will put it to your wife and I will abide by her decision. I keep the keys, manage the house, or I go."

The long pause had told upon Strang, and he drew a breath of relief; for the moment it really seemed that his mother's decision had been arrived at for the sake of himself and his wife.

"I'll ask her," he said; and running upstairs he found Merwin still brooding over the little lace cap, which she folded away between her hands as he entered.

"See here, my darling: I've been talking to my mother. I think she'll come round — stay."

"But I thought you did n't want her to stay — had decided —"

"How can I turn them out? It would n't be right — fair —" protested Strang; as though it had been his wife's suggestion, not his, that they should live alone. "And now I'm sure she means to be nice to you. Then my sisters will be company, help to put you in the way of things: you must try and meet them halfway, adapt yourself."

"Yes," said Merwin rather blankly. She had risen

to her feet and stood staring at her husband, trying to take in the meaning of all he said.

Suddenly he caught her by the shoulders, drew her close, held her to his heart, and kissed her. "We shall have our own life — our own happiness; and feel we've done no harm to any one, made no one miserable." The mutual touch warmed them, drew them together: they were man and wife — free for the most wonderful intimacy, and what else mattered! Strang's lips clung greedily to her lips and throat.

"My beautiful wild thing, my darling," he murmured; and for a moment they clung together in silence. Then he drew a little away.

"I must go, now, and tell my mother. It is all right — is n't it, dear? You don't mind her keeping the keys and all that; you see she is old, and it means a lot to her."

"Of course not — what does it matter? Why should n't she keep the keys if they're hers?" asked the girl with a puzzled stare. Then she caught his face between her hands and gazed into his eyes passionately: "Have n't we each other? — an' then there'll be the — the child. It's a strange, cold place — but we have each other; and the hope o' what's to come?" she whispered. But Strang drew back as though suddenly chilled.

"This room is cold; have you the window bolted?" he enquired fussily, went to it and drew back the curtain. "No — I thought not; that's what makes

the draught. Well, I'll go and tell my mother that it's all right — that you don't mind," he said, and turning, left the room; wondering how he could warn Merwin not to talk in that certain fashion about the coming of their child; to remember that they had only been two weeks married.

## CHAPTER XX

### A SOUL IN PRISON, AND A SMALL LIFE LOST

NEVER was there such a ménage as resulted from this rash agreement. In the strength of Merwin's love lay her weakness: she was always giving in to try and please Gilbert, to conciliate the mother who had borne him; always trying to adapt herself: losing all her own force in the attempt. Occasionally she flamed up into one of her old haughty passions; but she was instantly ashamed of it — the very walls seemed to tremble at the sound of her voice, the chandelier shook; while old Mrs. Strang took advantage of this shame to tighten the twitch by which she held her daughter-in-law, to insinuate some complaint between husband and wife, to prise the rift in the lute a little wider.

For very soon there was a rift. It began with trifles, which showed all the insistence of small things; the wearing quality of the minute.

Merwin loved to rise at dawn and go for long walks: but people wondered and talked. To be out so early was almost as suspicious as being out late. Stung on by his mother, Strang protested, and the early walks ceased.

Walks at all, in her condition, were nothing more

or less than "indelicate," hinted Mrs. Strang: and so, after a while, all walks were stopped.

She loved the open air; felt suffocated in a close room. Strang liked to sleep with his window shut: beneath a pile of eider-downs and blankets.

She did not care to eat unless she was hungry: the want of air in the dining-room sickened her.

And nearly every day Strang, with a sense of injury, heard his mother remark that she was sorry she could provide nothing Mrs. Gilbert liked. It seemed to him that Merwin might have adapted herself better after all he had done for her.

One day, Emma, with a sneer, suggested "hedgehog." But her mother did not let the remark pass: corrected her at once: insisted on her begging her sister-in-law's pardon: Mrs. Strang was never rude. She was worse; she was like an acid that bites to the bone.

It was difficult to imagine what the girl must have suffered. If she spoke, mispronouncing any word, she heard it rightly repeated during the course of conversation a few moments later; with a faint emphasis. If she flared into a temper, Mrs. Strang and Emma froze into silence. If she was silent, it seemed as if they talked at her.

She was awake long before dawn each morning: longing for the maid to come with the hot water, so she might get up: an agony of impatience in every limb. For she was restless beyond all words. Conceived and born in the open, her own expectant

motherhood tormented her with a longing for space: for the open skies, particularly at night.

But for her husband's sake she stayed indoors as much as possible. Her baby would be born two months earlier than it ought to have been: people must be led to think it was a seven-months' child: she must not appear to be prepared. But if she were much seen in public, all concealment would be impossible. Strang himself impressed this on her; for his conventionality killed all his pride of expectant fatherhood.

Mrs. Strang had never vacated the large, airy front room. Sometimes, when Merwin tried to assert herself, — crudely enough, it is true, — the front room and the keys were, metaphorically, thrown in her face. Strang, however, always tired now, miserably ill at ease and longing for peace, would talk her round; refuse to accept the sacrifice. Supporting the one he feared against the one who merely loved him. Merwin was always ready to forgive, to take him to her heart; he believed himself sure of her. With his mother it was different. He had never consistently defied her: did not know what would happen if he did; and in that want of knowledge lay his fear and her power.

He still loved his wife: but the greedy sex passion, which had swept him off his feet, was gone, or lying fallow. All the flame seemed to have flickered out of life; he was depressed and weak; and somehow — remembering that there was peace in his house before

Merwin's coming, and forgetting the negative nature of that peace — grew to associate all his troubles with his wife.

It was a bitter, cheerless February, which the lengthening days only served to accentuate. Merwin almost lived in the little bedroom — stuffed up by over-large furniture — suffering from the cold as she had never suffered in the open: sitting for hours staring out in front of her; or sewing — clumsily enough — at the tiny garments in which no one took any interest: eating her heart out with longing for her own people: turning over and over in her mind all possible means of renewing Strang's flagging love: cogitations which resulted in a shamelessness that repulsed him.

Then, one night at supper, Emma tanged too sharply on some overdrawn string: it was a question of grammar, the use of the double negative.

Mrs. Strang reproved her daughter; but she merely did it to draw greater attention to the slip, as Merwin well knew. She had disregarded or suffered such things, again and again in silence. But suddenly it seemed as if all the blood in her body went to her head; surging like molten lead up the back of her neck. It had been the first springlike day: she had been feeling more cheerful, was trying to talk pleasantly; and somehow the insult bit as it had never done before.

"I'll not speak at all, if I can't open my mouth without being set upon," she said.

Emma tossed her head and gave a half laugh, while Mrs. Strang looked at her sideways, as if she were some strange animal beneath contempt. But Lydia flushed hotly: she wished her sister-in-law would not make such rash assertions. She would have to give in: have to speak: and every triumph rendered her mother more tyrannical. She had a curious feeling for her brother's wife; half hating her — because she had ousted her beloved Mrs. Reannie, or so the simple creature thought, not realising that the two could never even touch each other in his mind — yet, in a way, loving her: persistently championing her, as far as she dared.

Strang shrugged his narrow shoulders. He had got into a habit of taking it for granted that women were always quarrelling. But the action put the finishing touch to his wife's fury of resentment, all the greater for its slow growth: for nothing is so embittering as injustice. And she sat through the meal in silence: then got up without a word and left the room.

A couple of hours later he went up to bed: turned the handle of her door gently, thinking she might be asleep, and found it locked.

"Merwin — Merwin, open the door." He whispered the words with his face close to the panelling: wondering what his mother would think — a speculation which obsessed his every waking thought. Then he repeated pettishly, "Merwin, open the door; make haste — it's cold here."

"There's more cold a'tween us nor that, Gilbert Strang." His wife spoke with no effort to modulate her voice.

"Why, what's the matter? Open the door —"

"The matter is I'm tired o' blowing dead embers. You can go — go to your *dressing-room*." She laughed harshly as she spoke.

"What nonsense — open the door at once. Do you hear me? Open the door at once," he said: rattled the handle again, and paused to listen, but there was no answer.

"Don't be a silly, — Merwin. I shall be very angry. Merwin, what are you thinking of, — is this the way to treat your husband?" His voice was almost plaintive. But still there was no response, and after a few more efforts he gave it up; and had turned, thinking that he would roll up in a rug on the dining-room sofa — already rehearsing in his own mind what excuse he would make to the maid in the morning — when Mrs. Strang opened her door.

She was in her dressing-gown, her face looking more wrinkled and dried up than ever, her twist of yellowish hair screwed up into a tight knot at the top of her head.

For a moment she peered at him, her candle held high.

"Merwin's not well. I was going to sleep on the dining-room sofa," stammered Strang: "it's all right, Mamma; don't let me put you out."

With a beckoning jerk of her chin the old woman

turned and walked back into her own room; while her son followed, knowing what was going to happen. Then he unlocked the door of the dressing-room which led out of it, and which still held the bed where he had slept till he went to college; unable to enter or leave his own room without passing through hers.

"There are blankets and pillows. You can do without sheets —" she hesitated and in his own mind he supplied the words "for this one night." But after a moment's pause she added — "till to-morrow," lit the gas, and turned and left the room, shutting the door after her.

For nearly three weeks Strang slept in the little room. Sometimes he thought if he went to the locked door during the night that Merwin would relent and let him in. And night after night he lay in bed, planning to do this; but was ashamed of his mother hearing him pass through her room: perhaps return — defeated; so that all his efforts at reconciliation resulted in a defiantly peremptory knock at his wife's door each evening; while Mrs. Strang hovered about the landing, on pretence of putting out the lights.

Meanwhile Merwin appeared only at meals, sitting in silence, and scarcely touching food; while the moment they rose from the table she returned to her own room, where they could sometimes hear her moving restlessly to and fro.

She was not sulking: though her state of mind

would have been difficult to define. It was as if the torrent of her love had been dammed back: walled up by all the repression and slights which she had suffered, rendering not only speech but thought an impossibility.

She yearned passionately towards her husband: but the very strength of her yearning made words all the more difficult. In addition to this, the conditions of life, the want of air and exercise, and the strong meat diet to which she had been accustomed, affected her health: she was ill, she was desperate. And like all sick and desperate animals she sought darkness and retreat; often leaving the blinds in her room drawn all day.

If Strang had taken her in his arms, laid his hand upon her — however roughly — she would have melted in a moment; but he never saw her alone, and lacked the courage to make any move beneath the watchful eyes of his mother and sisters.

So time wore on till the second week in March, when one night he awoke to see her standing at his bedside.

"Get up — you must go for a doctor." She spoke in gasps, her face livid and distorted; then turned to leave the room; feeling her way like a blind person, the candle all aslant in her hand.

Through the open door Strang could see his mother sitting up in bed and staring. But for once he took no notice of her: huddled into some clothes, called Lydia, then stumbled his way downstairs and out

to the stables: woke the groom, sent him for the doctor, and ran up to Merwin's room to find her lying on the outside of the bed, huddled together, moaning. He covered her with a rug, then, after bending over her in utter helplessness, entreating to know what he should do, sat down at her side.

After a while Lydia appeared, only a little less scared than he was — looking like a frost-wilted rose in her faded pink dressing-gown. She hovered about the room for a few minutes; finally suggesting a hot-water bottle, and went down to the kitchen to light the gas and put on a kettle; noticing as she passed her mother's room that the door had been shut.

A few minutes later the doctor arrived; and just as dawn was breaking — ushering in a wind-swept March day — Gilbert Strang's son was born: a true seven-months' child, who flickered out into the world and died before the day.

Going downstairs at about ten o'clock, on his way to get a cup of tea which Lydia had ready for him, Strang saw his mother through the open door of her bedroom: on her knees with a hot poker and a piece of blotting-paper, taking the wax out of the carpet, where her daughter-in-law had dropped it the night before.

She must have heard Strang pause, but neither looked up nor spoke. And he did not see her again till next day; when the orderly routine of life began once more, with his inevitable breakfast of bacon and eggs.

Merwin was desperately ill — as she was desperate in all else — and for nearly a week her life was despaired of. Even when that seemed secure, the doctor feared for her reason. But somehow she struggled through: maimed, bereft of youth and hope, all the magnificent buoyancy and strength which had distinguished her gone forever.

Strang was with her constantly: full of pity and self-reproach; shrinking from the sight of his mother, whom he now blamed for all that had occurred: almost defying her: planning how — directly his wife was about again — he would make some other arrangement so that they might have their house to themselves. Still — as always — making the fatal mistake of putting off — awaiting the opportunity.

For a little it seemed as if their old love might flame to life again. But Merwin was not of the kind that forgives easily. Not that she bore any malice — but the wound had gone too deep; she felt atrophied, past all caring.

If Gilbert himself had fallen ill now; if he had really needed her in any way, it would have been different. But he did not; and — worst of all — he did not need the child. He was sorry for her trouble, but he did not in the least realise it; and for his own part was relieved: felt it was all for the best, as his wife realised.

So the old dreary routine commenced once more. Only with this difference: Mrs. Strang left Merwin

alone. She had ceased to count: she could go where she liked; do as she liked as far as she was concerned; while even Emma realised that there was no pleasure to be got in tormenting such a dull, spiritless creature. And somehow Strang himself — though he was always kind, never spoke a harsh word — slipped into the way of ignoring her.

Only Lydia tried to understand: endeavoured, in her timid, ineffectual way, to enter into the other woman's life: even attempted to accompany her on the long walks which had recommenced, twittering along by her side, taking four steps to her one; finally being left far behind; for as Merwin's brooding thoughts gathered, her stride lengthened, and she forgot her companion.

In these days there were only two people to whom she ever willingly spoke; these were Simpson and Parrifleet. The former would often overtake her on his rides; and getting off his horse would walk by her side, with the reins over his arm: talking in his kind, genial fashion, just as he would talk to any one else — or so Merwin felt; not as if she were some strange wild animal. Then he was interested in her people, neither avoiding the subject, as some well-intentioned persons did, nor questioning her out of malice: but really interested. And not only in them, but in all she could tell him of nature, and of life in the open.

When she was with him she felt herself again; strong, and almost happy, and went home believing

that all might yet be well; that she had shaken herself free, once and for all, from the sense of oppression which terrified her. But the moment she entered the house it seemed as if a thick black curtain fell between her and the rest of the world: stifling her: deadening thought and feeling and speech.

Parrifleet she often visited: sitting, sometimes for hours, silent in his little kiosk, while he was at work; for by now the neighbourhood had found him out, and kept him busy; while the room at Clifford's Inn was only used for business appointments.

They had much in common: instincts, beliefs, even fears: though the man's nature was optimistic and sunny, while hers was sombre. It seemed as if he saw so far as to realise that nothing really mattered, while she only saw far enough to be frightened.

She had foreseen the loss of her child — "the death o' love — an' the pale flower that withers with it —" the very first night she saw Strang; though in the interim she had half-forgotten it. She had seen other things, too, which haunted her; and yet never to the ultimate end.

But for all his cheerfulness Parrifleet was not so good a companion for her as Simpson, for he was less normal: and it was for Simpson alone that her mood ever lifted: till the summer came again and the gipsy camp was once more pitched in the blind lane beyond Long Ilkley.

## CHAPTER XXI

### DESMOND'S BOOK REACHES A TRIUMPHANT ENDING

DESMOND'S book was finished.

Towards the end he had scarcely left the tiny den, nearly all octagonal window, which the other members of the Club — realising something more serious than fame to be at stake, though man-like never speaking of it — had assigned to him for a study.

The days lengthened, the trees budded; the birds sang outside his window, while an outdoor life replaced that of the fireside. The visits of other men to the Club became more and more frequent, as the country drew them. The May-fly rose; the tennis-courts were marked out: to have their lines washed away an hour later by a pelting April shower, while the sun laughed brazen-faced from behind the next cloud. Banks hovered tentatively round Lydia Strang once more, on pretence of loyalty to the family, "a livelier purple" shining upon his marvellous socks and ties. Kirkland and Van Rennen were still absent; while long anxiety, and the call of spring in her blood, drew the warm colour from Julie's cheeks, though hope was strong in her heart.

Meanwhile Gale, who had coughed his way through the cold March winds buoyed up by the

hope of summer and the excitement of a large public building in Oxford, — which he hoped to make worthy of the traditions of the place, — seemed to have taken on him a new lease of life. And Parrifleet brooded over them all, with the sort of tenderness which is usually shown only to children, and so often and so desperately needed by grown-ups. For though spring was a marvellous time of growth, and of new life, it brought with it the pains of parturition: when, or so he declared, the pull of the planets upon frail humanity was almost more than it could bear.

Desmond alone — unstirred by the celestial and fecundatory rays of what Parrifleet termed the Anima Mundi; and equally irresponsive to the rush of sap through the boughs; the upward push of all growing things; the new tumult of blood through the veins, accountable, maybe, for Banks's fancy turning, once more, to "thoughts of love" — sat, day after day, absorbed; scarcely leaving his room; re-reading, lingering over, polishing his work with loving care. Till, at last, nothing more was to be done. The book was finished, and he rose for the last time from his writing-table; mechanically straightening the edges of the sheets with that wistful feeling that comes to a mother when she sends forth her boy for the first time into the world of school, never to be quite her own again.

Life had grown suddenly flat. All the bite, all the vitality seemed to have gone out of his work. And yet it had seemed such a good book while it was in

the making. Every day he had run upstairs after breakfast, three steps at a time; and sat down at his writing-table, with a delightful boyish sense of hugging himself over what he knew was in store for him: waiting quite happily: sure that it would come: that unfailing influx of an alien power, which took up the story where it had been left the day before; just as one starts life afresh each morning on awaking: stringing him up to a fever of delight or tears — actual tears which streamed down his face as he wrote: driving his pen along; sweeping out of his hands the stiff-jointed plot which he had formed — how long ago? — breathing life into his men and women; and setting them afloat upon a current over which he had lost every vestige of control.

It was, indeed, what Parrifleet would call "possession": the "overwhelming influx of the Divine Akase" — whatever that might be!

And now it was all over. The question was what to do next? How in the world to dispose of his time?

He lounged to the window and stared out of it, quite untouched by the pageant of spring below.

Ten to one the publisher would pick the book to pieces: snip bits out of it to appease the libraries: bind it in red, which he detested. The wonder was that some representative of the English public did n't tie a string to the little finger of every musician, to jerk upon when the strains became too passionate or poignant: at present they seemed the

only people left free. Anyhow it was a rotten world for artists — for everybody with any soul.

Simpson, with his coat off, was planting out seedlings in one of the beds, beneath the window. How odd it seemed for any one to be interested in a thing like that. Desmond found himself wondering if there was ever any writer who had taken a successful stock-broker of forty-three as his hero.

Still with his hands in his pockets he lounged downstairs, and out into the garden. He did not mean to speak of his work — it was too newly dead. But as he stood over Simpson, gazing sombrely down at the broad, blue-shirted back, he heard himself — by some pressure of thought, quite apart from his own volition — announce the fact that the book was finished.

"Well, that's a mercy!" exclaimed the other, not even raising his head. "By Jove! That's something off your chest. I congratulate you, old fellow."

Groaning in spirit at the utter lack of human understanding, Desmond moved on down the terrace steps and along the lawn; past the big chestnut, upon which sticky buds were beginning to show green, and down the steps in the sunk fence. Wandering on, more or less unconsciously through the park land, till he came, at last, to Parrifleet's kiosk.

The little man, with a glass fixed in his eye, was bent over a ring which Banks — the most superstitious of all the Club members — had ordered from him.

"What is it now?" enquired Desmond, by an enormous effort sheering away from the one subject which really interested him.

Parrifleet laid down his tools, removed his glass and looked up. He did not often stop work for any newcomer, and the fact struck even through Desmond's abstraction.

"It is a topaz — and is to be engraved with a falcon," he said: "a charm to attract love and sympathy. But, indeed, you seem more in need of such a thing than Mr. Banks. Tell me, what has gone wrong?" He looked up anxiously, unable to get rid of a weight of fear which always overhung him in connection with Desmond.

"I've finished my book," blurted out the other. He had laid his hand on the table as he bent over the jeweller's work, and now Parrifleet touched it gently, with a caress like a woman's; though at the same moment his face lightened with relief to hear that it was no worse.

"That's a wrench," he said. "Our work is never quite our own, once it is out of our hands. No one else can ever put into it all that we have done; understand it as we do."

"Ah! you realise that?" Desmond perched himself on the edge of the table; his face eager, his whole attention once more engrossed in himself.

"You see, it has taken so long: been more to me than anything I've ever done before: meant more. You know it was begun to make 'her' proud of me."

Parrifleet nodded. "To convince her that I was capable of doing quite impersonal work. I've lost sight of the end — the reason for it — dozens of times," he added frankly. "But it was always there. And now the stimulus, the excitement, is over — and I don't know how she'll take it. Then they'll be weeks fuddling over bringing it out. I feel all on edge: as if I could n't bear it."

"Why don't you let her see the manuscript?"

"Because I want her to judge it along with the rest of the world: take it or leave it as she likes. I don't mean to press it on her notice, use it as a plea. But meanwhile — 'Pon my soul, Parry," he burst out, egotistical as all true workers, — "no one has any idea what it is! You now, for instance; any particular piece of work may take a few days, or a week — say a month at the most. And when you're not at work you live your normal life among your fellows — you can't *think* it into being. But look at me! For nine months I've never had a thought apart from this thing. And now it's done — and if Dorothy turns me down I'll shoot myself; 'pon my soul, I will! Anyhow, the Lord only knows how we'll live. I'll never write another book: I've spent myself over this. And to think of it mouthed over by the great British public, with the mental digestion of babes — pap-fed. Now with your work it is different. No one can misunderstand that."

For a moment Parrifleet's dark eyes rested on the young man's overcast face with a curious expression,

while his mouth curved in a half-sad, half-cynical smile. Then he bent again over his work.

"You have two copies; you got it typed in duplicate?"

"Yes!" Desmond kicked dismally against the leg of the table.

"Well, read one to us, while the other goes to the market. Read it in the evenings; that's the time to get the true taste of things."

"Oh, it would bore you to tears! Besides, how could any one read anything before that ass Banks? And then Finch —"

"Well, to-night — and I believe to-morrow — there'll be nobody but Mr. Simpson and myself."

"Simpson does n't count."

"You've not reached him yet, or you would n't say that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, in spite of all his matter-of-fact exterior, his slow, quiet ways, he is beyond you all in idealism and tenderness. You write, Mr. Finch paints, Mr. Banks talks — but he feels. Outwardly you have a clean, commonplace, good type of business man: but there's a subconscious self behind all that. He'll surprise you some day — get something out of life you are none of you capable of achieving."

"All right, rub it in."

Parrifleet laughed. "The eternal boyishness of you artists. But try us to-night. After all," he added

shrewdly, "we shall not be so very greatly below your average readers."

"I don't see that a fellow has any right to inflict his outpourings on his friends," replied Desmond. Then he added with sudden animation: "But there are bits — when Fielden, that's the man, you know, gets tangled up with the girl; is held back half believing what he preaches. Where tragedy grows — spreads its wings over them and their world, darkens everything, shuts out everything. And then there's an old doctor I think you'd like, Parry, I believe he's good — 'pon my soul, I believe he lives."

"Well, after dinner to-night — and every night when we three are left to ourselves, — eh?" And the little old man raised his glance to Desmond's brightened face with the look of a very beneficent and tender parent. "The least you can do is to let us share your friendships."

"By Jove, they're not all friendships by any means." Desmond slipped from the table with an air of restored vitality. "There's some strong stuff in it: I can tell you that, Parry. I say, what a morning it is. Too fine to stay shut up indoors — I'd no idea things were so forward."

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE TRAGEDY WHICH TREADS ON THE HEELS OF MOST TRIUMPHS

THE first reading took place that night. At the commencement Desmond was nervous: and the story seemed to hang fire. But soon he shook into his stride; and drew the two listeners on with him.

Jervis brought in the tray with whiskey-and-soda, hesitated a moment or two, asked if there would be anything more that night, and departed. Again and again Simpson replenished the fire: while insensibly they drew a little closer, as the night grew chilly, till their knees almost touched round the hearth.

But still Desmond read on, his chair turned sideways so as to catch the light, his cheek pressed against the brown leather back, one long leg flung over the arm: while Parrifleet sat very still in the corner of the sofa, his knees up, with his frail white hands clasping them, his head bent forward as if beneath the weight of brow and hair; his brilliant eyes, a little raised, fixed on the reader; dilating as Desmond's voice grew fuller with any stress of feeling; and Simpson leant forward staring into the fire, his pipe gone out between his teeth.

Eleven o'clock struck soon after Jervis left the

room; then half-past; twelve — half-past twelve; one — half-past one, and Desmond's voice cracked harshly. For a few minutes he struggled on, upheld by his own ardour. Then he laid down the manuscript.

"I can't manage any more."

He glanced round vaguely, mistily; then caught sight of the clock upon the mantel-shelf.

"I say, you fellows, look at the time! I am sorry!"

For a moment there was silence; while his eyes sought theirs with a sudden anxiety.

"Well —?" he was beginning, when Parrifleet leant forward and laid one hand on his knee.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Desmond. I can't tell you all that I have felt — thought, while you were reading it. But it lived and I lived in it."

"It's a good thing." Simpson rose and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. Then he turned towards Desmond, his eyes dim. "An amazingly good thing. By God, Desmond, you've drawn the heart out of me: I'd give all I have in the world to be able to do anything like that."

"It's an inspiration," said Parrifleet softly: "a creation. That man Fielden —"

"No, there you're wrong," put in Simpson. "It's not a creation. It's a portrait; the most vital, brilliant portrait I've ever come across, Desmond."

"What do you mean?" The author jerked up his head like a restless horse, while his cheek flushed.

"I took him from no one, nowhere — he's my very own."

"Your own, I should think he was: created after your own image; and you've reason to be proud of him: a brilliant portrait."

"I never intended — never thought —" Desmond had sprung to his feet, and for a moment his eyes blazed defiance into Simpson's face. Then, suddenly, he laughed. "By Jove, you're right, it *is* like me! What do you think, Parry, — do you see it? Eh, do you see it?" he enquired excitedly.

"Yes, I believe I do now. I was so absorbed in the story — in the whole trend of the character. But, of course, now I see. It is, as Mr. Simpson says, you — you yourself."

With a shout of exultation, Desmond flung round upon the hearth. "I set out to prove to Dorothy that I could be completely impersonal — you know I did, Simpson! You put me up to it when I was so confoundedly hipped." He was standing with his back to the fire now, one arm flung out along the mantel-shelf, his mobile Irish face glowing. "Now, look how it's turned out! That'll prove to her —"

"What — how?"

"Why, that I *can't* be impersonal: that I use myself, all my weaknesses and follies, just as unmercifully as I'd use any one else. I say, Simpson, but it's great! — If I'd done what I meant to do, I'd never have succeeded half so well. You know Fielden's an utter ass in places, a bit of a blackguard, too,

but he's real, and he's me — me! Ye gods! What an eye-opener! That'll show her how much I was to blame: nothing could be better."

The exhilaration held through two more readings; even mitigated the annoyance of Gale and Finch's presence at the last, which — going with a dash to the very end — terminated soon after ten of the third evening.

Then came the drop. They were all unstinting in their praise and appreciation, even Finch controlling his wicked wit: perhaps a little moved, if the truth were told, for the tale ended on a true Celtic note of tragedy. But it was all no good: the brief flash of Indian summer was over. The book was really finished. There was nothing more left as far as he, Desmond, was concerned.

"I'm done for, played out: I'll never write another. It's sapped me: I feel as empty as a drum. Awfully good of you fellows to have listened, been so jolly about it — an' all that; but — look here, I think I'll go off to bed if you don't mind. I've got a rotten head," he declared, and drifted, sombre-eyed and unsmiling, from the room.

Next morning, soon after eight, Simpson was standing at his glass shaving, when there was a hurried tap at the door, which was flung open before he had time to reply.

"I say, Simpson! I've got it!" It was Desmond, his face alight, a joyous exhilaration irradiating his whole person. "A ripping new plot — such a book!"

A fine thread of crimson showed amid the foam of white on Simpson's face. "Got what?" he asked with very creditably good temper; though, as he wiped away the lather and pressed his finger to the tiny cut, he began again, rather irritably: "you might have chosen some other time —"

"My dear fellow, there was no choice in the matter — it came! It simply came with a flash — like what 's-her-name, fully fledged from the brain of Jupiter. Do you realise all that it means, you dear old stick-in-the-mud?" he went on, seizing the other man by the shoulders and forcibly waltzing him round the room — a unique figure, with one side of his ruddy face white, a trickle of blood down his chin: collarless, his shirt-sleeves turned up, his braces hanging down his back. "If only Dorothy will have me now, we 'll be all right. I 'll be able to fire ahead, get to work straight away: make a fortune for her. Simmy, old boy, it 's going to be fine, the strongest thing I ever did: beat the other to a cocked hat. And I 've got you in it — a gorgeous figure. What that lovable old ass Parry describes as your astral body, your subconscious personality — and your dear little tubby self."

"That 's all right," said Simpson mildly: "only look here, if you go on jogging me like that my pants will fall off."

"But are n't you glad?" For a moment Desmond's face dropped. But the next instant he was all smiles again. "And I 've got such a girl, too; a corker:

absolutely original this time. Though" — and here his face twisted with a whimsical grimace — "we must n't let Dorothy know. That was the whole force of the argument, was n't it? That I simply had to copy. — What a morning!" he went on, turning to the window.

"'With a hey, with a ho,
With a hey nonny no,
True lovers love the spring.'

By Jove, what a morning! Look here, Simmy, can I have the chestnut out for a gallop? I feel I simply must let steam off somehow or other. I'll ride over to Market Charlford and send a wire to Dorothy."

"Breakfast will be ready in half an hour."

"Oh, I don't care; I've had some tea."

"The mare'll be very fresh; she's not been out for more than a week, except exercising: you'll have to be careful."

"You dear old muff. Fancy you teaching a Paddy like me how to manage a horse. Can I have her, come, now?"

"Oh, yes, get along with you!" said Simpson, conquering an inexplicable unwillingness. "And, look here, Desmond, if you're going to start work again, you'd better tell Mrs. Bliss; she'd set her mind on getting that den of yours turned out to-day."

"All right." Desmond flung towards the door, whistling, then turned, a gallant figure framed in the dark woodwork. "I say, life's not so bad, after all —

is it, old fellow? This book's none so dusty and the next 'll beat it hollow. And then there's Dorothy; she'll come round; I know she'll come round; I feel it in my bones!" he exclaimed; then broke out again: —

"'True lovers love the spring.'

By Jove, I'm simply bursting with the joy of life. I wonder if you've ever felt like that. I hope you have, Simmy, for your own sake. Though, I say" — suddenly his face became grave, as he paused with his hand on the handle of the door — "look here, I hope it does n't mean that anything's going to happen — that I'm fey."

"Rot," remarked Simpson, and Desmond laughed.

"The old pagan fear of a jealous God, eh? Well, so long. I'll get to work directly I come home; shan't see you till lunch-time," he said. And was gone, slamming the door behind him.

A quarter of an hour later Simpson watched him from the dining-room window — riding up the park with the chestnut sidling, snatching at the bridle, and kicking her heels beneath him — and sighed. It was jolly to be such a good rider, to look so perfectly at one with a horse; to be young with that abiding Celtic youth which rendered Desmond, only some five years his own junior, still a mere boy.

In an hour's time the chestnut came home — alone: her eyes bloodshot; her rakish head held high, a broken rein trailing: one side caked with mud.

Simpson was planting out a border of yellow camo-

mile in the Italian garden — it was all rooted up afterwards, for he could never bear the smell — when a breathless young groom came to tell him the news. And he followed him to the stable-yard to find the chestnut standing trembling; surrounded by a little group of servants, among whom ran a whisper — that ominous whisper which sounds like the coming of a storm through dry trees — over which sounded the loud, protesting voice of the head groom: —

"She was a good enough mare, easy, easy enough to handle when she were n't pushed," he declared: fiercely championing what he considered his own.

"Why are you all standing here? Had n't you better go indoors to your work?" Simpson addressed the house servants — gently enough, yet they all, even Mrs. Bliss, retreated without a word: — then he turned to the groom.

"And you, Collins, take that mare in, and saddle the bay, Clarke can take the cob and you can go and see what's happened — one had better go across the park, and the other out by the back gate. I'll get you each a flask of brandy in case — but probably he only got off to open a gate and the mare bolted."

Collins, half in at the stable door, turned, touched the mare's muddy side, and glanced significantly, almost with contempt, at his master. His horses were not the sort that fall if left to themselves, the look seemed to say.

"That's nothing — she may have tripped over

the rein." Simpson spoke sharply; but as he moved towards the house his heart was heavy within him.

However, the suspense was of short duration. Finch and Parrifleet turned out, with all the men about the place, to help in the search. But Simpson was still tramping miserably up and down the stable-yard — straining his eyes in every direction, afraid to move far away from the house, in case he should not be there to give directions when the news came, while Banks's chauffeur got out the motor, in case — in case — the thought would not go farther — when the under-groom came galloping back. Desmond had been found, lying against a fence with the ground trodden deeply all round; he must have been trying to force the mare at a jump. He was alive, but not conscious. Mr. Parrifleet and Mr. Finch were there, and had sent him home to ask for a mattress and shutter — a door or anything of that sort, Mr. Finch had said: and Mr. Banks's man had better go for the doctor.

From thence on the day was incredibly long: hurried and unreal. The injured man was brought home — unreal, too, irreconcilable with the buoyant personality of that morning — and laid in the morning room, where a bed was put up so as to save him the jar of the stairs. The Market Charlford doctor came: stayed a long time: made an exhaustive examination; then suggested another opinion. Late that same night, though it was hard to believe that months had not passed, the London doctor arrived: saw

Desmond, was closeted a long time with his colleague; then with an air of condescending urbanity gave his opinion as concurring precisely with that of the country practitioner. It was an injury to the spine; with partial paralysis, which would spread. The patient might last a few days, a week at the most; would almost certainly become conscious; but for all that the end was inevitable.

Just as he was going away, leaving the local doctor in charge, with two nurses, telegraphed for from Town, Simpson, who had been persistently meeting every train, came in with Dorothy Sartoris. She had been in the north of England; there had been some delay in forwarding the wire he had sent; but directly it was received she had set out on the long journey; every moment an agony of fear lest she should be too late; thankful for even this respite; exhausted to numbness.

Simpson himself took her to Desmond's room, holding her hand like a child; and left her sitting by the bedside, deadly white and absolutely still, while the two nurses had supper together, and discussed the man she loved, now "the case."

Then one went to bed, and the other prepared to spend the night at Desmond's side — not that there was anything to be done — while the greater part of the household settled down to a pretence of sleep, for it was close on one o'clock.

Presently Simpson crept into the sick-room, and led Dorothy away to the library, where he coaxed

her to sit by the fire and drink some tea; which he himself made, with a little black kettle stolen from the scullery: very strong tea — symbolical of all the sympathy which he felt, and could not express.

But the girl's head kept turning towards the door, and she looked so like a piteous prisoner that he had not the heart to keep her long; though an hour later he again tiptoed into the sick-room and wrapped his own fringed rug closely round her.

Next day, as the doctor had predicted, Desmond recovered consciousness for a moment or two.

"It's a ripping book," he whispered, each word a long time in coming. "Is that you — Dorothy? I knew it would — be — all right."

Then — "Una — she 's a corker — time I got to work — jolly hair — reddish — see her — quite well —"

Looking over his papers when all was ended, Simpson and Dorothy found rough pencillings, evidently done in bed that fatal morning: a little plan like a map for his new novel; and Una, the name of his heroine, thus: — "Heroine — Una — red hair."

He thought of her a lot; her name sounded as often as Dorothy's on his lips; and other names that they did not know. But the completed volume seemed quite forgotten; while the proofs — arriving daily from the publisher — piled up unopened.

Still he lingered on. The London doctor came down again and was amazed. But no, it presaged no recovery; only bore witness to an intense vitality.

"He was wrong once — he said a day or two, a week at most. And now it's three weeks — nearly a month," cried Dorothy, beating her heart out against the stolid acquiescence of the two nurses. Then appealing: — "Don't you think, don't you feel, that he will live — must live? Oh, he must live — *must!* People can't judge, don't know, people who are never more than half alive themselves: he was all life — full of the joy of life."

At first it seemed as if nothing could ever be the same again. But the daily routine gradually drew them all back into the old ways: only that there were now three women in the house, besides Mrs. Bliss and the housemaid engaged to wait on them: while Julie, home for the Easter vacation, hovered about the place; brooded over Dorothy, insisted on taking her for walks, made her sit out of doors when Desmond dropped asleep without her hand in his: which, indeed, seldom happened and nearly broke her heart when it did.

Lilian Fane motored down to enquire: alone, for she had quarrelled with Miss Stringer, and was given tea in the drawing-room. And Strang's wife — with Lydia, pale and delicately indomitable, in her wake, Lydia who held to, hated, and yet championed her sister-in-law at every turn — also called; to be entertained by Banks, who showed them the pictures, and talked to the unmarried lady. For Merwin, who had grown sombrely silent since the loss of her child, hardly spoke, though she warmed to a

passionate pity when Dorothy crept into the room for tea: smaller than ever and white as a spirit.

The tennis-court was marked out again. "One must have some sort of exercise," said Finch — for at this time it seemed necessary to invent an excuse for every amusement — and started singles with Gale; who appeared almost desperately unwilling to dwell on the thought of death.

Sometimes one of the nurses and Julie would make a "four"; or Banks would consent to stand in the corner of the court and shout orders to his partner, when he was not careering round the country with the night nurse, who was the pretty one.

Thus it may be seen that the whole character of the Club was changed — lost: while, with the rustle of petticoats, there came a stir about the place, a sort of shamefaced gaiety.

Simpson, alone, seemed permanently touched. He was very fond of Desmond, who possessed all the characteristics of charm and gaiety which he himself lacked; while, during these days, he became sincerely attached to Dorothy, both for his friend's sake and for her own. Parrifleet also — shy amid all the new bustle and stir — held to them: his gentle personality, his intense belief in the thin veiling between the physical and spiritual worlds, comforting them both, despite their scepticism.

These three made their own atmosphere, went their own way: annihilating self: curiously detached

and far away from the rest of the little party, who came and went around them.

The paralysis was spreading. There was hardly any pain: but great restlessness and want of natural sleep: a striving of the spirit, so intense that at times Dorothy almost wished that the weak body would let it go — then grew certain that, in the end, Desmond's physical strength must triumph.

April crept into May, but still he lingered: though the mind wandered more frequently, speech grew increasingly difficult.

"It will be harder to lose him as time goes on," said Dorothy. Then: "If only I may have him a little longer. Oh, Simmy!" — she had dropped into her sweetheart's silly little nickname — "if only I was n't so young, I could bear the thought of it better. Think of all the years and years before me; and of all the time we have wasted with our silly quarrel; it is dreadful to be so young, and so strong."

Simpson smiled at the last word. But gradually he grew to realise that she was strong: that the slender body was little more than an almost transparent screen between the outward world and the ardent flame of an intense vitality.

June dawned. The sick-room was full of roses, on a table at the bedside, and along the mantelpiece, making a shrine of it beneath the glowing Madonna and Child.

Then one day Desmond signed to Simpson to lean over him.

"The dinner," he whispered.

"Yes, yes, old fellow," answered his friend, thinking his mind must be wandering, for it was the middle of the afternoon. "Not time yet, you know — nearly tea-time."

The sick man shook his head wearily, while the tears came into his eyes. For a moment he lay silent: then tried again.

"*The* dinner — every year — you know."

"He means the annual dinner, I think: don't you, beloved?" put in Dorothy, bending over him

Desmond nodded, while his face cleared.

"And you want them to have it, just as if you were well."

Again he nodded.

"All right, we'll settle it." For a moment she hesitated, while her eyes grew luminous. "Next year we shall be turned out — like Adam and Eve from Paradise — an old married couple."

Desmond's gaze met hers and he smiled: the old whimsical smile. He knew, and she knew. But it was better to pretend than to whine — he had always hated whining.

"We can't do it," protested Simpson later.

"We must do it," answered Dorothy, her full lips drawn into a hard straight line. "If he wishes it, we must do it."

"Seems a ghoulish sort of idea," grumbled Banks when it was mooted to him. Then he turned his mind to wondering whether the night nurse or Lydia

Strang should be his guest of honour: till he chanced on Finch kissing the former in the shrubbery.

"Merely a mediæval custom," remarked the artist airily.

"That 's all very well, only she does not happen to be a mediæval sort of person; nor you either,— eh, what?" responded Banks shrewdly. And immediately despatched a note of invitation to Miss Strang; while Finch invited Lilian Fane, and the night nurse was left to have her supper — or breakfast — alone as usual.

"Might as well make the best of things. It's no good brooding — won't help Desmond, poor chap. Anyhow, for God's sake, let us be cheerful," said Gale; and asked Finch's widow of the previous year, who was nothing if not cheerful, to be his guest.

For himself Simpson chose Julie: poor Julie, who had not heard anything of Van Rennen for over two months; and whose pain was chiefly evident in her fierce indignation at any offer of sympathy.

"I know you hate it, and I hate it," he said kindly. "But anyhow, we'll drink the lad's health: and, really, it will be awfully good of you if you'll see me through."

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECOND DINNER PARTY: WHICH ENDS IN THE RETURN OF TWO TRAVELLERS AND THE DEPARTURE OF A THIRD

Once more the long table in the dining-room at Fountains Court was aglow with roses; glittering with glass and silver. Partly from a desire to make the best of things; partly because they were glad of any change, any rush of work tending to raise the gloom which almost insensibly overhung them, the household had exerted itself to the uttermost: with the effect that the whole place shone with, smelt of beeswax, overflowed with flowers.

At Simpson's right sat Julie — in a white silk frock this time, owing to the dignity of her engagement; at his left Lilian Fane. And beyond her Finch. And beyond him again Lydia Strang, in the same grey frock that she had worn a year before.

On the opposite side, next to Julie, sat Parrifleet; while beyond him were two empty places. Then came a young soldier, a man named Blount, who had lately joined, with a bright young society girl; Gale and Mrs. d'Esterre. And at the head of the table, greatest innovation of all, Lady Van Rennen herself.

The place next to Parrifleet had been set for

Dorothy: but though her courage helped her to dress; to present herself, fresh and smiling, for Desmond's inspection, she could not face the dinner: but wrapped in a shawl sat crouched against the outer lintel of the sick-room door: "I'll come in at dessert when you drink the healths," she said. "For the rest you must let me off; forgive me this time, Simmy. I'll not be a coward much longer — when there's nothing left to fear," she added with a tremulous laugh.

Seated at the table Parrifleet put out a slender hand and set upright the glasses which stood by the empty places: and which for some whim, difficult to understand in so conventional a person, — or perhaps in disgust at having the look of his table spoilt, — Jervis had reversed.

It was a fancy of Parrifleet's that Van Rennen and Kirkland would return that night. He had broached the subject more than a week ago: had talked it over with Julie as though it was a settled fact, so convincingly, indeed, that the white silk was purchased and put in the hands of the dressmaker for no other reason than that her lover should see her at her best, while his steadfast belief in what he believed to have seen in the crystal gradually impressed itself on the minds of the other members, so that for the last two days they had all been watching for a telegram; jumping at the sound of a bell. Thus the places had been set: though by the time the actual evening arrived all, excepting Parri-

fleet himself, and perhaps Julie, had ceased to believe in their being filled.

From the opposite side of the table Lilian watched the action with a shrug of contempt. The man was not a gentleman: well-bred people disregarded sentiment; besides, the lapels of his dress-coat were ten years behind the fashion. The Club was going downhill; everything was changed: already the numbers were lessened. By another year her chance would come; it only meant patience — patience — that crutch of little minds and small ambitions.

The next moment she had plunged into the silence which had followed Parrifleet's action, while Lady Van Rennen turned to Banks and questioned him remorselessly as to the news from Siberia.

"Nearly a year since they went; and close on two months since I heard. Things should begin to hum by now: what do you make of it? What do your people make of it?"

"Oh, it's all right; they've been very busy getting all the machinery and stuff up: I suppose they've started working by now — have no time."

"Well, the boy might write. Sir Abel don't mind; says he's glad the lad's got guts enough to strike out on his own." Julie tittered, she could almost hear her future father-in-law; besides, Miss Fane's expression was a study: — "But that's no reason for him not writing to let us know whether he's alive or dead. When did you hear — eh, young woman?"

"Eight weeks and two days ago," responded

Julie in a voice which held resentment; not against Van Rennen, but against Miss Fane, who had now fixed her with a polite air of enquiry. "I don't expect letters" — her tone was almost defiant. "He has too much to do — it's even a business getting them posted. Besides, how could he let us know if he's dead?"

"Strange how your party's dwindled, Mr. Simpson. There's poor Mr. Desmond, and then Mr. Strang. By the bye, what's become of Mr. Strang?" enquired Lilian, with her bright air of making conversation, her inevitable knack of nosing at every fact which one could wish suppressed.

"He's ruled out; he's married."

"No, is he really? The last one I should have thought of. Whom did he marry — any one down here?"

There was a moment's awkward pause, while Lydia flushed uneasily. Then Simpson answered quite placidly: "A friend of mine."

"A woman," paraphrased Finch glibly — "a woman; and take her all in all, we shall not look upon her like again."

"By Jove, but you should have seen the woman I saw this morning," put in Gale suddenly.

"Where?"

"In the church."

"My dear Gale, you've been dreaming. I've seen ladies in Little Ilkley church and I've seen females. But a woman. A woman's a rare bird," mocked

Finch. "Besides — in the very beginning you must have been dreaming you were in church."

"Well, I was. I went to look at that arch they said was Saxon — it's no more Saxon than I am: but I saw something for my pains. She was just coming out as I went in, and I stood aside to let her pass. You know everybody in the village, Miss Cartwright" — he leant forward and looked up the table to Julie. "I wonder if you could tell me who she is."

"What was she like?"

"Like nothing in heaven or on earth."

"Shut up, Finch: you don't know beauty when you see it — you can only paint pictures. Though that reminds me, upon my word she was like nothing on earth so much as that mysterious portrait of Beatrice d'Este; do you know it?"

Simpson leant forward, his eyes on Julie. Suddenly it seemed as if the sense of waiting and expectancy, which had possessed him ever since he came to Fountains, was going to be fulfilled.

But after a moment's hesitation the girl shook her head.

"No," she said, with a blush which might have been for her own ignorance; "I don't think I ever even heard of the picture — never saw it."

"Then can you imagine who it might be?"

"Let me see; it might be" — her face dimpled with mischief — "it might be Mrs. Flynn."

"That slab!" cried Finch.

"Or Miss Lyon."

"That dried shaving."

"Or Nelly Carter, the postman's daughter; she's the beauty of the place."

"If she wears a white embroidered dress of infinite fineness, and carries a blue silk parasol, and is tall and slender as a goddess and has amber-coloured hair and the slenderest little neck I ever saw, like Mary Queen of Scots —"

"Why Mary Queen of Scots?"

"Because it was so white and transparent that you could see the wine through it when she drank." Gale had begun half in extravagant fun, but by now he was flushed with excitement.

"My dear fellow, I said you were dreaming: but I misjudged you; you were merely drunk. And — judging from the wine simile — so was the lady; and just coming out of church, too; oh, fie!" laughed Finch.

"Well now, who do you think she was, Nelly Carter, — eh, Miss Cartwright?" persisted Gale, disregarding this flippancy.

"N — o — o. It must have been a stranger. There are lots of tourists about this time of year."

Gale gave a shout of triumph. "Why, she was n't even wearing a hat!"

"Probably changed with her young man, and lost his, or pawned it. Tourists are proverbially immoral in the matter of headgear," remarked Finch.

"But," began Gale; then broke off to listen to the

sound of a motor which throbbed its way down the drive.

"Hullo, another invited guest — eh, what?" cried Banks: while Simpson's eyes met Julie's, each pair alight with their own unacknowledged thought. If Gale had not been dreaming, if the Beatrice d'Este had really been seen in Little Ilkley, — and there could not be two such ladies, — there was no knowing what might happen, he thought; while the way the girl's eyes left his and sought Parrifleet's, with a wide stare of triumph, showed where her hopes had flown.

Suddenly her face dropped. "It 's not coming here!"

"It 's only turned round to the front door — we always miss the sound then," answered Simpson.

"No; we would have heard the bell — surely, by this time."

"Hope nothing's gone wrong at Oxford," said Gale nervously. For having — as he said — built to defy eternity, he lived in nervous dread of something happening to his work.

"Probably only my gun: they said they'd send it over from Aldershot," remarked Blount, with a military air of having settled everything.

"It is n't coming here at all," chimed in some one else: the whole party astrain with listening.

"It must have been on the road."

"Or perhaps only a tradesman gone to the back."

"Or the doctor to see Desmond; slipped in without ringing."

"What a chronicle of small beer," muttered Gale discontentedly. "We're all getting to know each other too well; conversation's choked with domesticity. It seems as if we can talk of nothing beyond each other's affairs. When people get to this state they must either dine tête-à-tête, or a dozen miles apart."

"Ah —" The general nervousness broke in a long-drawn breath as the front doorbell pealed through the house; and Jervis — setting down the dish of fruit which he held — turned to leave the room; while the whole party, as though governed by a single impulse, rose to its feet.

"It's Mr. Van Rennen and Mr. Kirkland," remarked Parrifleet quietly. He leant sideways and pulled the two chairs out from the table.

"Nonsense!" Lady Van Rennen's voice was a bellow of hopeful incredulity; but Julie had slipped from her place and was out of the door. There was a sound of men's voices; then the girl's shrill with excitement: "Archie!" And picking up her tight skirts well above her knees, the old lady literally ran from the room.

Involuntarily they all turned and would have followed her had not Simpson retained them with a laughing gesture.

"We're not wanted there, I think," he remarked quietly, and seated himself; the rest of the party, after a moment's hesitation, following his example.

Through the open door he could see a mere streak

of white, folded round by two rough-coated arms and a tweed ulster, the whole overcharged by a surging immensity of crimson brocade: and wondered what it would be like to come home to people, instead of merely to a place, however alluring. Then he reached across the table to hand Miss Fane some strawberries.

"There's no need why you should n't have any dessert because Ulysses has returned," he remarked, laughing: "I believe Kirkland's somewhere there, but we'll wait for him to extract himself from the mêlée."

"Mr. Kirkland's just gone to wash his hands, sir," remarked Jervis, who had appeared and was handing round the wine. "He said as how he would n't be a minute. Here he comes, sir," he added, as Kirkland — colourless as ever and calm as though he had merely returned from a day in Town — entered the room: bowed, slipped round the table into his own place, and opened the napkin which had been folded with so many protests.

"Awfully sorry I'm late."

"By Jove, but it's good to see you." Simpson leant forward and beamed down the table.

"You expected me?"

"Parrifleet declared you'd come; saw it in a crystal. Well done, Parrifleet, you've certainly established your reputation forever. How are you, Kirkland: all well, I hope?"

"How are things going? What's the output likely

to be, — eh, what? I must say you've been pretty chary with reports, considering what you were sent out for," put in Banks.

"Hold on, Banks; food first," responded Kirkland shortly, and turned to Simpson. "Is there anything? We should have been in time — calculated it to a nicety — only for a wretched break-down on the line, which lost us our connection."

"Jervis will find you something. Tell Mrs. Bliss to do what she can, Jervis, and serve coffee in here. It is jolly you two turning up now; things seemed somehow flat; there have been changes — Ah! here are the others," he went on as Van Rennen appeared, with Julie clinging to one arm and his mother to the other. "Welcome back, Van Rennen, we've missed you sorely," he continued, moving forward to shake hands: noting the boy's brown leanness, the steady look in his eyes, with frank approval.

"Come and sit down; here's your place all ready for you, next to Miss Cartwright: Parrifleet foretold your coming."

"Good for you, old Parry." The young fellow slipped into his seat, with his hand still in Julie's; and beamed round at them all. "It's good to see you — by Jove, how often I've thought of this dinner, and the last one. Hullo, Banks, you still here? We've got some grand news for you; you'll be able to face that five hundred fine now without turning a hair. Hullo, Gale, how are you? And Finch; Finch, you're

looking weedy; you want six months of the Schist Belt to put some life into you. I tell you, the air's like champagne — but it's wild as the world's end: never seen a decent dinner-table since we left, have we, Kirkland? — Or a decently dressed woman. What a swell you are, Julie, and, by Jingo, you've grown."

"Grown! I've stopped growing years ago!" cried Julie indignantly.

"Well, anyhow, the mater's grown, only the wrong way on." The words bubbled out of the boy as from an irrepressible spring of good spirits and vitality. And looking at him Simpson found it difficult to believe that he was the wearied, rather blasé young man who had entreated to be allowed to join the Club, only a little more than a year earlier. "You all look tremendously toffed up," he went on gaily: — "we'd no business to come tumbling in upon you in this fashion, but we've simply raced for it. Nothing but pack-horses from Kerkerod Creek to Petrowski Zavod — you'll have to learn to ride, Julie — and frightful going. The Belokoi Stream — you remember that on the map we made? — was in flood, and we got every rag we had with us soaked through, and half our baggage lost; which accounts for this," — and he thrust a ragged frieze sleeve into view. "Had to lead our horses the greater part of the way, too, and walked through our last pair of boots. An old fellow offered Kirkland a penny at Victoria Station: thought we'd been padding the hoof."

"You're disgustingly dirty and horribly dressed,

and you smell of shag, of the very vilest description; but you certainly look more of a man than you did a year ago," remarked Lady Van Rennen; her tiara well on one side, her round red face beaming with pride. "It makes me want to be out roughing it again, free of the flummery Sir Abel and me's been working for all these years. He'll be pleased to see you, my lad. Will say you've got —" she hesitated, her shrewd glance on the expectant horror of Miss Fane's face: then veered. "Well, anyhow, it's made a man of you; was just what you needed."

"That's good from you, Mother, after spending your life trying to keep me in cotton wool. Hullo, Jervis! Soup? — good old Mrs. Bliss, give her my love. By Jove, it's fine to be back and see you all, though I'm clean spoilt for civilization. But there're some missing — where's Strang? How do you do, Miss Strang — what have you done with your brother?"

"He's married." It was Simpson who answered.

"And Desmond, dear old Desmond?"

"Desmond's here, but very ill — Miss Sartoris is nursing him. Oh, here she is," he went on, rising, as the door opened and Dorothy herself appeared on the threshold.

Young Van Rennen sprang to his feet; his charming face aglow, delighted to see her, as he was delighted to see all belonging to his old world. "How do you do, Miss Sartoris? I'm awfully glad to see you, awfully sorry to hear that Desmond's not well," he

began. And was moving round the table to shake hands, when he paused, puzzled by a gesture, almost of repulsion.

"How do you do, Mr. Van Rennen? How do you do, Mr. Kirkland? I'm very glad to see you back." Dorothy's voice was level and she spoke almost mechanically, while Kirkland bowed over the table; his leathery face as impassive as ever, his head bent; his deep-set eyes raised and fixed on the girl's white face.

"I want you — he wished you all" — she went on, in a curiously flat voice — "to drink his health: to drink to the memory of what you have all been to each other — and to the future. No, I'll not come in — or sit down, if you'll excuse me. But I want you to do it now; now at once."

The girl spoke in quick, broken sentences, and it seemed to Simpson as though she were palpitating on the very edge of flight. Or rather as if by some force of will she had compelled her body to come to them; while her heart and soul were far away.

"You will do it now — all of you." She beat softly with one hand on the palm of the other as she spoke: enunciating each word as if with a desperate effort at clearness and patience. "At once — at once."

"Yes, of course — at once," answered Simpson gently. "He is no worse — is he?"

For a moment Dorothy hesitated: her dark eyes, immense with fatigue, holding some strange expres-

sion — almost of exhilaration — which Simpson could not fathom. Then she spoke, very slowly. "No — he is not worse; he is better — I think," she said: and with a little bow turned and slipped from the room.

The health was drunk almost in silence; and for a while the old sense of depression overhung the party. But Van Rennen was bubbling over with spirits that nothing could quench; his mother and Julie overflowing with happiness which made itself felt; infecting the others, stimulating them to gaiety; while later on — though the young couple slipped from the room — there were more healths to be drunk and speeches to be made. So that it was fully an hour before the rest of the party rose from the littered table.

As they moved towards the open window Gale gave a sudden exclamation; stepped back to the table, seized a branching candlestick and held it high in front of one of the pictures; that of the Early Victorian girl, in ringlets and white muslin.

"That's odd. It's the dead spit of the woman I saw to-day. I never even noticed the face before — those straight brows and rather deep-set eyes, the little rounded chin and long neck. If those confounded curls were out of the way," he declared. And flushed with wine and excitement, he involuntarily stretched out one shaking hand and touched the girl's hair, as though to push it from her cheek. Then with a high laugh, he turned to Simpson, who

was watching him with an air of disproportionate disapproval.

"It's odd — it seems so real. The picture and the woman — perhaps Finch was right; perhaps it was all a dream. If it had been this girl she'd be sixty now, to judge by the dress. There was something ethereal about her too — in the church and all. Perhaps she was a ghost. What do you think — eh, Simpson?"

"I think you've had just about as much wine as you can carry," replied his host gravely: and was turning to leave the room, when Gale slipped his arm through his and laughed again.

"Seems an odd combination — Beatrice d'Este — Queen Victoria, and Little Ilkley! I believe Miss Cartwright knows something — I shall pump her."

"Don't be a cad, Gale."

"What do you mean?" Gale's voice held all the outraged virtue of a not quite sober man.

"What do you want to go poking and prying about a woman whom you know nothing of — never will know?" fumed Simpson: inexplicably disgusted with Gale, and furious at the realisation that to question Julie was the very idea which he himself had been cherishing, ever since Gale first spoke of the stranger whom he had seen. To poke and pry and question — it would be an odious vice in Gale; and, as he was forced in all honesty to confess, no less odious in himself.

He would ask no question, make no further

search. If happiness was coming, if it was that which he and Fountains were alike waiting for, it would come — as inevitably as night followed the day.

As he stood in the hall, having seen the last of his guests depart, Jervis touched him on the arm. "Miss Sartoris wants to see you, sir, if you will step upstairs."

"Where is she?"

"Just outside Mr. Desmond's room — the doctor 's there, sir."

"All right, I 'll go up at once," answered Simpson. Then, with an inexplicable sense of nerving himself for some ordeal, he moved towards the front door, and stood there for a moment or so drawing in deep breaths of the pure night air, before moving upstairs and along the corridor; where he found Dorothy standing, leaning against the lintel of Desmond's door; her haggard face, still wearing that curious look of exaltation, in strange contrast with the dainty purity of her evening gown.

"What 's wrong? I hope Desmond 's no worse — in pain?"

"No — he — he —" she began, then raised one hand and pressed it against her bare throat as though it hurt her. "He 'll never have any more pain. Oh, Simmy, Simmy!" she stretched out her other hand and laid it on his arm. "I 'm not sorry, I 'm glad, glad for him — to be free — after lying here all these weeks. I had to tell you myself — for you 've

been our best friend, always, Simmy. He's gone — my boy! I can't believe it: he was so full of life, it seems impossible. The nurse and doctor are there now, but I was alone with him, quite alone: I shall always be glad of that."

"Why did n't you call me? You poor child, you poor, poor child!"

"I could n't bear even you. I wanted him all to myself at the end. I think we both knew it was coming — we learnt to know so much of each other these last few months. This afternoon he was dozing, and he awoke quite suddenly and said, — 'After all, there's the sequel!' And when I asked him — 'To what?' He said, — 'To this crabbed old book of life.'"

"When —"

"Just after you went in to dinner. We seemed to be waiting. Not frightened or anything; just very solemn, almost happy. But we wanted to be alone — I sent the nurse away on purpose. He struggled a little as if to raise himself. I slipped my arm round his neck: and he cried out quite loudly and strongly, — 'Oh, Dot!' not as though he were in pain; but like he used to do when he had got a splendid new idea, — and was gone."

"Child — child —"

"Oh, Simmy — I can't be sorry yet. It was so gallant, — like his life. It was like when we rode together, and he would take a high fence I did n't dare; and half turn and wave his hand and shout as the horse topped it.

"Even then he was not gone — just the other side of the fence, perhaps, but his spirit was still in the room with me. And I knelt there with his dear head on my arm, for a long while. Then I remembered and went down to you."

"Remembered what, dear?"

"To tell you to drink his health. I knew he wanted it; had set his heart on it. And I tried not to let you guess — though the way Mr. Kirkland looked at me made me think that he knew. But I did n't want to spoil your party — Julie's happiness; there is so little in the world, and he liked pluck above all things. My darling boy! I want to be plucky, to live my life as he'd wish me to, gaily and gallantly."

Suddenly her voice broke, and Simpson — the tears running unchecked down his broad face — stretched out his hands to her, with that baffled feeling of utter helplessness which comes to a man at the sight of a woman's grief.

Another woman might have put her arms round the frail creature, clasped her to her, known what to do or say. But Dorothy drew back from the very touch of his hands: austere, virginal creature, even in the state of exhilaration — almost ecstasy — which possessed her. Never to unbend to any man, and to few women, now that this one human being, who had held the secret of the tune which piped her heart to life and warmth, was gone.

"Don't touch me! Don't let any one come near me or touch me to-night. I want to be alone — quite

alone — it seems like our wedding-night. But to-morrow —" suddenly her voice broke, a look of horror swept over her face. "There's to-morrow — and the day after — and on and on, endless morrows without him —" She flung out her hands with a gesture of despair.

"God's cruel — cruel! I can't — I —" she began: swayed and fell forward into Simpson's arms.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### DESMOND'S SWEETHEART STARTS LIFE AFRESH, TO THE VERY BEST OF HER ABILITIES

AFTER Desmond's death Dorothy stayed at Fountains for a fortnight; with her sister, whom Simpson had wired for, to keep her company.

The older Miss Sartoris was a more set edition of the younger. There was something tantalising about Dorothy's aloofness: it was like a flower that one is always waiting to open; closed above a glowing heart. But the other was set like a china blossom, delicate as a morsel of Sèvres, but incapable of expansion. She was hardy and conventional where Dorothy was exquisitely prim: quite sure of herself where Dorothy hesitated: devoid of all lights and shades: incapable of moods, with all the narrowness of her sex and none of its allurements.

Even Finch was repulsed. "She is like a nicely lacquered, prettily painted tin tray," he said, and somehow the simile suited. There was no depth to her, and yet no softness; no lovable failing: she was irreproachable and unapproachable: exasperatingly neat in mind and body: finished off with a machine-like economy and precision.

Dorothy visibly wilted under her wing. But for

all that, Simpson feared that she might grow like her: it is so fatally easy to follow any example for which one has a tendency.

They talked of it; for the girl herself realised the danger. Desmond had shown it to her in that wonderful character study which she had once so resented. It would be so restful just to become Margaret's shadow, to let things slide on along the groove already worn for her.

"I left off going to dances when I was twenty-five," said Margaret. And though nothing was further from Dorothy's mind than the thought of any such gaiety, she resented having a milestone set for her: realising that each year must be marked by some fresh repression. Desmond's doctrine of joy had sunk deep. Gaiety would always be a little of an effort with her, never come quite naturally. But for all that she determined on it: life should grow fuller, not emptier.

"There are odd little meannesses in my nature — not over saving money, but saving myself — which frighten me. I shall be like that girl in his book if I don't take care: saying, — 'I don't think that quite nice' — 'I don't think a lady should know anything of such and such people,'" — she declared. "And I don't mean to be like that: a drab old maid — idling over my narrow daily round: drawing my skirts aside from everything human."

She spoke with fire. But she was so small and so quiet that Simpson half-feared she would drift with

the stream; till, a week after her return to London, he heard that she had joined a settlement in the East End.

Later on he went up to see her, laden with fruit and flowers from Fountains; tracking her by the help of a genial coster, who described her as: —

"Damnation little, but doin' her damnedest, an' real fly."

"I'm reforming the neighbourhood," she said with twinkling eyes when Simpson told her — it was strange, but it was only since her great sorrow that she had achieved any real sense of humour: — "To be described without one single gory adjective is a triumph. How's Julie?"

"You know she's married."

"Yes; she sent me some cake. I divided it among my girls, who put it through a wedding-ring and slept with it under their pillows. Superstition's the one form of poetry left to us in these parts, Simmy."

"Well, they're at the Vicarage now: just back from their honeymoon. But only for a day or so: they're off to Siberia next week."

"I can't imagine Julie married."

"I don't think she ever even remembers it. Her life seems one long flirtation with Van Rennen; varied by flirtations with other people: the whole business a glorious game."

They were sitting in Dorothy's tiny parlour while she arranged the flowers he had brought; shouting across the room to each other, for the noise of chil-

dren playing outside was little short of deafening; while above it all — up and down the street — went the monotonous cry of: —

"Ca — me — e — e, ca — me — e — e, ca — me — e — e —" which she translated for Simpson as "cat's meat."

"You look rather thin, Dorothy; but you're all right — happy here in your work?"

"Yes, Simmy, quite happy. Oddly enough, it still seems a sort of waiting: not like a great tragedy, but as if Harry had only gone quite a little way. I sometimes wonder — do you remember what Browning says about a vessel only being made to hold so much, capable of no more? I sometimes think that I had as much of happiness — that live sort of happiness — as I was capable of: that after a time I might have disappointed Harry; flagged, grown chilled: that now I'm really learning life through other people's lives: and when we meet again I shall be a little bigger, capable of more."

Simpson sat silent: realising that somehow she was right; that she had reached her full growth, as far as this world went, during those few weeks by Desmond's bedside. And yet how tragic it seemed, that one should come to know one's self more suited for the sad virtue of resignation than for any fulness of life; to be able to say that, perhaps, after all, it was for the best.

"Mrs. Bliss made you the cake — sent it with her love." He scarcely knew why he said it, except in a

clumsy endeavour to show how they still thought of her.

"Dear old Mrs. Bliss! how good she was to me. I suppose she is alone now: that the reign of the petticoats is over?"

"Yes; Julie's been running in and out: but she'll be gone by the time I get back: no need to make rules against women, these days, Dorothy; there's no competition among them."

"What 's become of Miss Fane?"

"Oh, she's given us up as a bad job. Unless — do you know I sometimes have an idea she and Finch may make a match of it."

"Simmy, why don't you marry?"

"Who'd have me?"

"Almost any one — with any sense."

"My dear child, I don't want any woman to marry me because she thinks it would be a sensible thing to do. For the rest: would you marry me?"

"No." Dorothy's lips tightened.

"And why? Because of the past? Do you realise that by the time a man gets over forty, all the women he'd care to marry have pasts, or husbands and children? There's no room for him." He rose, smiling rather wistfully. "Will you come uptown with me and have some dinner?"

"I wish I could, Simmy, but there's the girls' club, I —" she began. Then suddenly she realised the expression of his face. "But I can, of course, and I'd love it. If you don't mind waiting a moment

while I run round to the Institute and find a substitute," she said; disappeared into the next room and came back pinning on a hat. "Just light the gas and put on the kettle and we'll have a cup of tea before we go — I won't be a minute."

## CHAPTER XXV

### SIMPSON'S RUSTIC PEACE IS AGAIN BROKEN

SIMPSON had been over to a distant farm buying a load of new hay; a task which gave him infinite pleasure. He had arrived at the farm — beneath the rolling shoulder of the downs, a good ten miles from Fountains Court — early in the afternoon. But the bargaining, though amicable, was protracted. The farmer had come from Gloucestershire, and his rolling burr was infinitely leisurely. Besides this, there was tea in the wide-flagged kitchen, and the stock and pigs to be inspected: ruminated over, scratched and poked in the manner which the city man had discovered to be orthodox.

The hours rolled by as smoothly rounded as the downs themselves: heavy with all the summer scents of farm life; cows and elder-blossom, and freshly-baked bread.

Simpson enjoyed every moment of it. The buying of the hay alone was a protracted delight: which he rolled on his mental palate like a fine old wine: by no means to be gulped down at one draught.

Thus it happened that it was well past seven when he started to drive home, congratulating himself that he was the only one at the Club, excepting

Parrifleet, — who did not care when or how he fed, — and had ordered a cold dinner on the chance of being late.

A mile or two from the farm the road had narrowed to a mere lane between high hedges, when something — which at first looked like a load of hay — loomed up before him in the dusk, and drawing rein he backed into an adjoining gateway, for it was too narrow to turn.

A moment later, he saw that it was a gipsy caravan. And behind it another, and yet another; the two front ones open, with women and children perched in front, or sitting with dangling legs in the doorway at the back; while the men tramped along the hedgerow, their lurchers yapping down the farther side.

The last van, however, was closely shut back and front, drawn by an ancient, swollen-kneed grey horse, and driven by a heavy-faced, powerfully built young man, who balanced himself upon the shaft; while behind this came a dilapidated spring cart — piled with bundles — on which sat a woman nursing a child, and hung round with pots and pans of every description.

As the last passed, Simpson recognized the man on the shaft: and called out "Good-evening," — a greeting which was returned by a sulky nod. It was Merwin's Cousin Sam. She had taken him to visit the camp only a couple of weeks ago, and introduced him to the hunchback and old Auntie Rachel, and this Sam Lovell: a man whom Simpson classified

as not being the sort that he would care to meet alone on a dark night. Though that day he had seemed docile enough to be very easily twisted round Merwin's fingers; while she, on her side, used her power to the utmost.

For since the coming of her own people the girl had flared out into a hectic excitement and restlessness; showing an ardour of attachment and fellow-feeling for them all; coquetting with Sam and Dan as she had never done before; setting the other women of the large camp by their ears; as though in defiance of Strang, who bitterly resented their coming, and wished her to cut the whole connection.

The sour, unwholesome calm of his house was broken up. His mother and Emma were once more alive with venom, while Merwin, no longer dully acquiescent, answered them back, loudly contemptuous of her husband's timidity. Thus the old battle of "my people" and "your people," which has ruined so many married lives, began again.

She refrained from asking her relatives to the house, it is true, but she claimed the right to be with them as much as possible: took to going about without a hat; and once when Strang himself, in a burst of weak jealousy went after her, he found her barefooted; sitting on the steps of her grandmother's van peeling potatoes, with Sam lolling at her side.

Merwin had refused to come home; she was busy; her time was her own; she would come when she chose, no sooner.

"Home!" she replied bitterly: "it may be your home, but it's none o' mine. A coffin 'ud be more like home: the ghosts in the churchyard better company than your whey-blooded folk."

"I don't care what you say. It's your home and I'm your husband, and you've got to obey me and come when I tell you," cried Strang, white with passion, and caught at her arm: on which Sam had jumped up and would have attacked him had not Merwin bade him "let be," saying he was woman's work, worth no man's handling: then dared him go home and tell his mammy what she said.

And Strang had gone, because he was utterly helpless: did not know what to do next: feared Sam, and was ashamed of his fear, though he tried to persuade himself that he took the only dignified course.

A couple of hours later, after dark, he heard his "wife" wish her cousin a loud, laughing good-night at the very door — held open by the scandalised parlour-maid — then go straight up to bed; and tortured himself wondering what they had been doing, how they had talked of him; though in truth Merwin, after following his departure with miserable eyes, had finished her work in gloomy silence; then taken the potatoes into the van and set to work preparing a meal for her grandmother; never addressing the young man again till he met her halfway home and begged to go with her. Even then she hardly spoke, and the laughter was all for Strang's benefit,

for she held a primitive belief that love might be stung to life by jealousy.

As may be imagined, Market Charlford was all alive with talk of Strang's "gipsy wife": talk which buzzed out as far as Long Ilkley and Little Ilkley, even penetrated to Burlaps, and on the other side to Upshott. Thus it was that, for every one's sake, Simpson was glad to see that the camp shifted. If Merwin had seemed happy he could almost have wished her gone also. For the life she lived was impossible, and it seemed no good trying to judge her by ordinary standards of morality. He had known how it would be; she was life incarnate and Strang like a death's head. But she was not happy; would not have been happy if she had gone. For he was shrewd enough to realise that her bitter resentment against her husband was the outcome of a still living passion; that, though the vicinity of her own people had excited her, it had not made her any more content.

It was after nine by the time Simpson got home, had a bath and sat down; dreamily happy with a sense of hugging his loneliness, for somehow Parrifleet did not count. One's soul remained the same in his company: for he was one of those rare people with whom it is possible to be silent without any sense of restraint. And Simpson's mood was one of silence; for during the long-drawn-out sweetness of those mid-summer days he experienced again that sensation of waiting for something, which had come to

him with his very first sight of Fountains: a feeling of expectancy, which on such evenings as this took the definite form of an immense, clear, blue, open space where a woman's face hung like the moon in a clear sky.

Dinner over, he walked up and down the terrace smoking and thinking. It was seventeen months since he had seen his "Beatrice d'Este lady," as he called her. He had expected the memory to weaken. But rather it had strengthened, helped him to fresh subtleties in her face; as though he saw her every day, and had so grown to know her better.

At one time, but that was in the spring before Desmond's death, the memory had strengthened to a fierce desire to speak with, to touch, the woman herself: a desire which ultimately drove him to London, where, for a fortnight, he haunted every possible place where she might be seen; persistently and extravagantly doing two or three theatres every night; remaining in each for only so long as sufficed him to scan the occupant of every box and stall; and, if possible, the dress-circle; obsessed by the idea that as he had seen her first at a theatre, it was there that they would again meet.

Soon after eleven, seeing Jervis moving about the house putting out the lights and shutting windows, he went indoors, thinking that he would go up to his own room and read in bed.

But his day was doomed to have no such peaceful ending. For, just as he was lighting a candle in

the hall, the bell outside the newly closed door was pulled violently, clanging through the quiet house, again and again without a pause.

Jervis came running downstairs; but by that time Simpson had got the bolts undone and flung open the door, to find Strang standing on the steps.

"What —" he began, for though the man's mouth was open he did not speak — then he waved back the servant. "All right, Jervis; you can go to bed. I'll finish shutting up," he said and laid his hand on the lawyer's arm.

"Come indoors and sit down; then you can tell me what's wrong."

"I can't sit down." Strang spoke with a curious hiccough like a drunken man; then he took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "Forgive me, I'm exhausted — was in a hurry — I had driven to Burlaps and only just got home, my horse was tired." For a moment he paused, then added lamely, as if glad of some commonplace subject — "It's not far across the fields — a pleasant walk — quite a pleasant walk on an evening like this."

"You did n't come here at half-past eleven at night to tell me that."

"No, no; of course not! You must forgive me — unreasonable hour — and all that. But — but" — he moved a little into the light of the hall as he spoke, and Simpson saw that his face was ghastly — "I want to borrow a horse and trap. I — I —" Again he hesitated, and then burst out, with a curious ges-

ture of his hands, like a woman: "She's gone! gone off with those people of hers: I got back from a hard day's work at Burlaps to be met by that news."

"What, that she had gone with them?"

"No, that they had gone. Burford — you know he's one of the councillors — stopped me on the way, and told me they had moved their camp, gone off Upshott way: — 'Better keep your doors locked, Strang,' he said with a damnable sneer. I'd have knocked him down, but what would have been the good?" he went on. "One can't do those sort of things in these days: besides, he's a client, an influential man. Anyhow, I was only too glad to hear they were gone. And I went home and straight up to her room, feeling happier, more light-hearted than I had done for weeks: to find her gone. Gone! Just when I was thinking that all might come right." He spoke with petulant self-pity.

"How do you know?"

"She was nowhere in the house. She had been in her room since morning. — Lydia said she heard her crying — then she went out about six o'clock. It was ten when I got back. She had n't returned; no one had seen her. Mary says she was off at the camp early this morning, directly I left. What do you make of that, eh? Curse her! she's brought me nothing but trouble, I might have known."

"It's no good talking of what might have been."

"Well, what am I to do now, tell me that?" It was the old cry. "I came off here all upset, meaning

to borrow a horse and trap, go after her; knowing you would help me. But what will I do with her if I bring her back? I can't take her home to my mother and sisters after — after —"

"Damn your mother and sisters!" burst out Simpson, and swung off in the direction of the stable.

"Where are you going?" Strang caught at his arm.

"To wake up Clarke and get the bay harnessed."

"I don't know — Perhaps — perhaps, after all, it would be best to wait till morning — what do you think? There'll be a row — they're a rough lot."

"And you mean to say" — Simpson turned round and stared in amazement — "that you'd let a woman who loves you go to hell for fear of a row!"

"Love!" Strang laughed almost hysterically. "Love, — when she's run off with another man."

"By God, supposing she has, — and, mind you, we don't know it yet, — it's your own fault. If a woman ever loved any man, your wife loved you, Strang — though the Lord only knows why! If she's gone, she's well out of it. Though remember this — if you leave her with those people to-night — make no effort to find her — you need n't come here again, expecting me to help you."

"To-night — it's night." Strang spoke with a gasp, as though he suddenly realised the fact: then began to tremble. "She went off with him — I know she went off with him, Simpson. They were always together laughing and talking; rolling their eyes at

each other, and now — now!" For a moment he hesitated, then added weakly: "She had everything she wanted — everything — and that coarse brute of a fellow!"

Simpson stood still, gently tapping with one foot on the gravel. "You came for a horse and trap," he said, speaking slowly and stolidly in his effort to hide his furious impatience.

"I know — I thought — I thought — But what am I to do?"

"Do what you like. I can't go after your wife, bring her back where she's not wanted."

For a moment or so Strang's pale eyes searched the surrounding landscape. Then, with a sudden burst of resolution, he turned to Simpson. "I'll go — if only for proofs. I'll go — and if I find her in that fellow's arms, by God, I'll — I'll —"

"Run away!" muttered the other man beneath his breath and moved off to the stable-yard.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### STRANG MAKES SOME EFFORTS TO PLAY THE MAN

All through that long drive Strang only spoke twice, and each time it was to repeat the same words: —

"She had everything she wanted."

As for Simpson he was thinking what right he had to be party to such a proceeding: to drag a woman back to a life she was utterly unsuited to, and a man unsuited to her: to perpetuate a miserable blunder out of sheer conventionality. But, for all that, some inherent spirit of lawfulness forced him to drive on, with Strang more than half unwilling, at his side.

The country smelt deliciously; each hedgerow a trail of sweetness. There was moonlight and mist; and once, from a tiny coppice, they heard a nightingale's note. It was a night for love and romance, not for sordid tragedy, or still more sordid passion: a night of wasted beauty.

They passed the farm where Simpson had been that afternoon. And then, three miles farther on, they came to the gipsies' camp, pitched on the wide grass margin of the road.

Every light was out,and all in silence, till some cur heard them and barked, awaking a dozen more like echoes.

Still no light showed. And Simpson, getting out of the trap, stumbled through the camp, with the dogs yapping at his heels: found the van with the grey horse hobbled near it, for no tents were pitched and the halt was plainly temporary: banged at the side and shouted.

Then a light was struck, not from within but from underneath, and Sam rolled out: stumbled sleepily to his feet, and with his hand shielding a match peered into Simpson's face.

"What the hell do you want? Oh, it's you, Mr. Simpson: beg pardon, but it's a damned queer time to be waking honest people out of their sleep."

"I'm sorry. But the fact is there's some trouble." Simpson seldom jumped to conclusions, and he hesitated now, doubtful how to express himself. "Mr. Strang's worried about his wife. It appears that she went out this afternoon and has n't returned."

"What's that ter me?" The man's voice was sullen.

"He thinks that —"

"That I've got her, eh? Then, why don't he come and look for her himself, the louse! instead o' sendin' another chap after his woman? Afraid, eh? Afraid — I reckoned he wur that sort the first time I ever set eyes on him." The man spoke with savage contempt.

"As it happens he's in the trap now. And remember this, Sam, he has the law on his side."

"There ain't no law, as ever I heard tell on, as

can force a woman to go back ter any man against her mind."

"Then she's here."

"If she were I'd break her neck liefer than let her go back to a white-livered cur such as yon."

"Is she here?" repeated Simpson quietly.

With an oddly dramatic gesture the gipsy flung his arms wide, as if to say, "Would these be empty if she were?"

But still the other persisted.

"Is she here?"

"No, she's not — damn you!" snarled the man.

By now a dozen dark forms had crept up from under the vans, with an ominous mutter of resentment. Some one lit a lantern; and as it was held up to get a better view of the intruders, Simpson caught a fair sight of the young gipsy's haggard and morose face. Certainly he did not look like a successful lover, and all his old belief in Merwin revived. She might have left her home; be actually in the camp; but certainly not as this man's mistress.

"Will you come and tell Strang that?"

"Eh, that I will!" muttered Sam: moved forward — with half a dozen men at his heels, and a cluster of half-clothed women whispering in the background — and leant threateningly over the splashboard of the trap.

"What's this I hear tell on? What the hell are you doin' here? You'd best get along to your mammy, or you'll be sorry for it."

"Aye," shrilled a feminine voice: — "we've had enough o' the like o' him."

And then some one hissed, a long-drawn, sibilant hiss, such as is used to start two dogs at each other's throat.

Simpson saw Strang gather himself together with a shudder. Then he spoke, shrilly defiant.

"I want my wife."

There was a rough laugh, and a woman shrieked out some obscenity, while Sam caught at the lantern and held it so close to Strang's face that he was forced to shrink back.

"Now, look here. If yer are n't man enough to keep yer wife, it's your business, not ourn. An' it's no good comin' whinin' round here for her. Her's right as said we'd had enough o' yer kind; more nor enough. Yer got the finest girl in the whole countryside, an' yer did n't know how to use her. If yer want to get off with whole bones, yer'd better go. By God! I don't know how I keep my hands off yer! Now, git — do yer hear me, git!"

"I'll not go without my wife!" persisted Strang; his voice rising almost to a scream.

"By God, I'll break yer bloody neck if yer don't! Yer can't say I've not given yer fair warnin'."

"She's not 'ere, I can tell you that!" cried a woman.

"Do yer hear? Now, go!"

"I don't believe it — I'll not go!" Strang spoke shrilly, with all the desperate obstinacy of a weak

man. "Or if I do, it'll only be to fetch the police. By God, I'll have the whole place searched! — I'll have you turned out of the country. But I'll not go, I'll not!"

"Be quiet, Strang; what's the good of all that? They've told you she's not here," put in Simpson.

"And you believe that? You're taken in by that?" Strang laughed harshly. "You don't know them as I do, the whole damned crew! But I'll not leave her here to-night — to-night with that blackguard. She's my wife — mine! An' I'll show her — I'll teach her. She's here, I tell you. Where else should she be?"

"Well, get out o' that there trap an' look for her, if you don't believe our word." It was an elderly man who spoke, moving forward from among the others and putting his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Out o' this, my boy; we don't want no trouble here."

"It's my business." The young fellow spoke sulkily, but for all that he moved on one side.

"It'll be the business o' all o' us if the police are brought about our ears. Now, then, you get down, sir, an' come along with me if you don't believe our words — both you gentlemen. And you, Peter, you hold that there horse."

Shaking with mingled fear and defiance, Strang climbed to the ground; and they were led round the camp; peered beneath the first two vans; then opened the doors, and flashed the light into the eyes of the half-awakened children. Strang, with all the

suspicion of a small nature, persisting in entering: searching under the bunks and in every corner.

Simpson never forgot the picture laid bare to his unwilling eyes. The dark, crowded interiors heaped with multi-coloured clothing: the flushed glow of the children's faces, their great dark eyes blinking in the pale light of the lantern; and Strang, peering in among them, white and drawn, like a soul in torment.

At last they reached the Lovell van and peered under it; while a curious murmur rose from the crowd who had gathered closer.

But though there were a couple of rugs where Sam had lain, and a half-grown lad still asleep, there was nothing more. And passing round by the front — which was tightly closed — they moved to the back of the van; where they found Sam himself, on guard at the bottom of a little flight of steps.

"I'll not have 'em in here," he said; and again that curious murmur went round the crowd, a sound almost like a sob. "I'll not have 'em pryin' here!" he repeated with an oath.

Again Strang laughed, almost triumphantly: — "She's here — what did I tell you, Simpson?" he cried, his voice high with excitement.

"There's no living woman in that there van, you can take my word for that," said the elderly gipsy gravely.

"And you expect me to believe you? You show me all of them except the one where she lived. Do you think I'm so easily fooled?"

"Well, take the lantern and go yourself — the other gentleman has more faith in our word. Stand aside, Sam, an' let him pass."

The young fellow moved back, but as Strang put his foot on the first step he pushed forward again, and for a moment Simpson thought he meant to strike him; but he merely snatched off his hat and threw it on the ground.

"Hats off when yer goin' to see a lady," he said. And, too excited even to resent the action, Strang sprang up the steps: fumbled a moment at the latch, then flung open the door.

He was holding the lantern in front of him, while his figure blocked the opening so completely that Simpson could see nothing, except that he stood there motionless, apparently staring in front of him.

The next minute, he swung round, pulled the door to behind him, and stood on the little platform; his face whiter than ever, while the lantern, still held high in his trembling hand, cast dancing circles of light over the silent group beneath him.

"Did yer find what yer was seekin'?" There was malice in the elderly man's voice: but it seemed to recall Strang to himself, for he moved slowly down the steps and handed him the lantern.

"No, you were right; she is not there. I — I 'm sorry; I wronged you. Come, Simpson, there's nothing more to be done," he said. He stooped, picked up his hat, and mechanically smoothed it over with his sleeve: then, with bent head and dragging

step, moved over to the trap; where Simpson — after waiting a moment to press some money into the gipsy's hand — followed him.

Just as he gathered up the reins, however, Sam leant forward across the side and spoke to Strang.

"If it were n't for her, by God, I'd 'a' killed yer before I'd let yer go. An' I tell you this: I fought her this very day at dawn ter come along an' bide with me: she as has been the sun an' the moon an' the stars an' the whole world to me ever since she wur a lil lass, an' she would n't. An' why, a'cause a' yer — yer, without one drop o' red blood in yer veins! But look yer now. If yer don't mind yer ways, an' make 'er happier nor what yer have done, — give her a home as is a home, — by Christ, I'll swing for yer! Do you hear? If them was my last words I'd say 'em. An' we'd meet in hell for the way you've served that girl, sure as there's a God above us!" he said: flung up his hand with a dramatic gesture; and turning on his heel walked away.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### IT APPEARS THAT MERWIN HAS ALREADY TAKEN MATTERS INTO HER OWN HANDS

THE drive home seemed unending.

Somehow, out of the clear beauty of the night, had come a dark and drizzling dawn. Simpson was tired to the soul: depressed beyond all words by this tragedy to which there seemed no end; longing to be quiet; for out of sheer nerve excitement — a desire to convince and justify himself — Strang talked on without ceasing, till his companion could have wrung his neck for him.

"It was a dead woman; an old woman. That grandmother Merwin was so fond of. When I opened the door, I felt sure I 'd find my wife — I did n't believe a word they said — I felt sure! And there was that old creature — horrible! Horrible! Lying facing the door, with her eyes wide open.

"Why did n't Merwin tell me she was dead? But she never told me anything, never put any confidence in me — her husband," he went on petulantly. "And you would have thought her so frank and open — but women are beyond me.

"That was old Granny Lovell — who had all the money. I suppose they were taking her away; not

telling Merwin about it for fear she should put in a claim. But where's Merwin? That's the trouble. Perhaps I'll find her when I get back. Don't you think so, Simpson? She may have gone a long walk and lost her way. Perhaps she was fretting about the old woman. I'll do all I can to make up. We might go away for a week. But I don't know if I can manage it — there's my mother and sisters to be thought of. And they say old Mr. Princep's dying; he may want to make another will. No, no, it would never do to be away.

"I'm sorry I misjudged Merwin — ashamed. After all, she did n't go with them — but where is she? Where did she go? You know she was —" he broke off sharply. "When there are things before marriage — naturally a man thinks — suspects: do you wonder I was frightened?

"What a night it's been! And a busy day tomorrow; I don't know how in the world I shall get through it. Look here, Simpson, don't turn up the road to my house: I'll get out, if you don't mind, and walk — slip in without awaking any one. I expect I shall find Merwin — it will be all right: things settle themselves somehow. It only needs a little patience; I'm always telling her that. Good-night, Simpson; — I can never thank you enough for all you've done — never."

He climbed slowly out of the high trap: white and worn, a stubble of light beard on his chin, his blue eyes bloodshot, his black suit thick with dust:

a pitiable-looking creature in the drizzling dawn: stretched across the splashboard to shake hands with Simpson: then suddenly crimsoned.

"I did love her — do love her! God knows I love her! But you know how it is, how afraid a man gets when there has been — when he knows." Again he hesitated; then jerked himself upright. "But it will be all right now — we must settle something — arrange differently. If only I could see a way out."

The household were astir by the time Simpson reached Fountains. And feeling sleep out of the question, he ordered an early breakfast; bathed and shaved, and then sat down to it, endeavouring at the same time to fix his mind on the morning paper.

But between him and the affairs of the nation came those of the wretched couple with whom he seemed to have become so intimately involved. He had no faith in Strang's sudden access of optimism. Things do not come right by merely waiting, while there is a species of patience which is more killing than any revolt. That was the sort of patience which Merwin herself had been practising during the last six months. As for Strang he might think he was going to alter everything. But there was no inward force to push him on. To the end he would mean well: hesitate, doubt; finally taking the well-worn path of letting "I dare not wait upon I will."

People did not change: Strang was as unalterable in his weakness as his wife in her strength, her pain, her superstitions. They were born with certain

characteristics, just as they were born with certain shaped noses; time might modify, but that was all it could do.

For no particular reason his mind went back to the last time he had been walking with Merwin, when a chaffinch — a "chuvion" as she called it — had fluttered, twittering, along the hedge in front of them: a sign, she said, that the camp would soon be moved.

"Which camp?" he had asked.

"Oh, any camp — the camp of life," she replied sombrely. And though he had laughed he realised at the time that there was nothing to laugh at: that—however ridiculous the abstract belief itself might be — her faith was so great as to impel it to become a fact. It was the same in all her superstitions; when she believed that a certain sign meant joy or grief, her mind would so dwell on it that for her, at least, the joy or grief would certainly come.

No, nothing would alter either of them. It was as he had said at the very beginning, a case of fire and water. And with a sigh he was turning to the financial column of the "Times," thinking that here, at any rate, was something he could understand, when Jervis came hurrying into the room; his expression a strange blend of excitement and horror.

"Please, sir, the baker has just come from Market Charlford, sir."

"Well?" In a moment Simpson's mind had leapt back to the Strangs.

"He says as how a bricklayer coming across from Long Ilkley this morning between six and seven, by the little footpath — perhaps you know it, sir — as runs between Ilkley and Charlford, past that there pond —" the man hesitated.

"Yes — yes?"

"Well, it was there he found her, sir, saw something in the water. It ain't any depth, not above a couple of feet: but there she was, face downward, and dead; must have been dead a fairish time, or so the doctor said when they got her out."

"Who are you talking about?" Simpson had risen, shaking from head to foot, trying to believe he did n't understand; though in the moment which elapsed before Jervis's answer the words — "When the chuvion twitters, it's a sign the camp 'ull be moved" — pattered through his head, with an odd emphasis on each syllable as though the words themselves were running with the news.

"Mrs. Strang, sir; — no wonder Mr. Strang was in such a taking last night: a terrible thing — terrible. An' her lying dead there all the time, poor girl — poor lady, I should say. But there, it may be all for the best. Shall I clear away, sir?"

Fate — Providence — call it what you will — shows a grim humour at times. He and Strang had been making their little plans: re-shuffling the cards: trying to arrange all the issues of this queer game of life: the stake — as is so often the case — a woman's life. And all the time they had been playing like

children, with a discarded, mutilated pack, while the game was really over, lifted forever out of their hands, decided for them.

It was no use seeking any possible end, for the end had come. But, with the curious perversity of fatigue, Simpson's mind hovered round the subject, conjecturing as to what might have been done; the state of mind in which she had gone to her death: with her child lost, her grandmother — who had been a mother to her — dead: — forced to deny the one love offered: faced by the dreary monotony of an existence which could only grow more drab as time advanced.

After all, it was, as Jervis said, all for the best in its ending: if one could only forget the appalling waste of human feeling. She was a martyr to life, — the exuberant life which ran so warmly through her veins, — and had taken upon herself the only retaliation possible. As for Strang, Simpson had no qualms about him. There would be a storm of grief and self-reproach — followed by a sense of relief. And everything would go on just as it had done before. But, oh, the waste!

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### BANKS RECEIVES YET ANOTHER, AND MOST UNEXPECTED CHECK

"EXTRAORDINARILY melancholy season, autumn is, — eh, what? Autumn in the country, I mean," complained Banks. "Seasons in Town don't seem to matter; there's always something going on."

"There's always something going on here, if you were n't purblind to everything that does n't cost a small fortune to keep going," responded Simpson: rather inaudibly, for he held a tress of baste in his mouth; being busied tying up creepers in the wide herbaceous border which ran along one side of the walled garden.

"Oh, I don't know; the country's very beautiful, poetical, and all that, but it gives me the pip. Town's jolly — but then one gets sick of the Club — " went on Banks discontentedly — " and the same fellows every night; the same old round, the same sort of cooking — bridge, and all that."

"Well, why don't you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Hand me that pruning-knife to begin with — marry, of course. You've been spoiling for matrimony ever since you joined the Club. Sometimes I

believe that's the only reason why you did join — to stimulate a jaded appetite." Simpson spoke rather irritably.

"Well, there's a good deal to be said for it and a good deal against it. But, 'pon my soul, I've half a mind to try."

"You can't experiment. Matrimony's not like a bottle of medicine: take a few doses and then throw it away if it does n't agree with you," remarked Simpson, still mindful of the tragedy of Merwin's life.

"Extraordinary you hitting on this very subject at all just now," went on Banks, immersed in his own plans. "Perfectly extraordinary! Second sight I suppose Parrifleet would call it. Matter of fact" — his tone was almost tender as he drew on a new pair of light-tinted gloves, with infinite care smoothing down each finger, opening and shutting his hand so as to ease it — "I was thinking of doing the deed this very day: at least, starting on the preliminaries — more or less committing myself. Though how you came to think of it beats me."

"Nothing very wonderful considering you've asked the opinion of every soul about the place, not excepting Mrs. Bliss; binding us all to dead secrecy."

"Of course, it's a risk," went on Banks; brushing by this cynicism as though he had not heard it. "One really knows nothing about a woman until one's married to her. Then it means giving up an awful lot, and all that. But, after all, one must make some

sacrifices for the tender passion — though, of course, things will never be the same again. One's second love —"

"Second!" ejaculated Simpson.

"Well, what's wrong with that — eh, what? You don't mean to say you doubt I loved that Jezebel? — Knowing me as you do, seeing me as I was —? It's ruined my life, there's no doubt about that; things can never be the same again. But there's such a thing as a — a — a what do you call it — an Indian summer of the affections, my dear Simpson. And the fact is I want a home of some sort in Town. I've got a lot of nice things knocking about all over the place. Besides, I feel I ought n't to go back on the Strangs, after their misfortune and all that; would n't do to seem a prig. And now that poor creature's dead; and I feel I might have led them on to think — to expect — Must behave decently, you know, for the sake of the Club, and all that — eh, what?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, go and get it over. You stink like an apothecary's shop: what's that beastly scent-stuff you've got on you?"

"I never use any scent, you might know that. It's my brilliantine." Banks took off his hat and passed his hand over the smooth, sparse fringe which garnished his baldness. "Do you think there's too much of it — eh, what?"

"Too much what?" enquired Simpson, maliciously, busied over a huge truss of Michaelmas daisies, which had been beaten aside by the heavy rains of

the night before. "There does n't strike me as being too much of anything, either inside or outside of your head. Look here, hold this stuff while I tie it."

"Not I — it's all dripping wet! When a man 's going courting —"

"Oh, go to hell!" interrupted Simpson crossly, struggling with the mass of growth in one hand and a length of baste in the other. Then he suddenly relented. "I wish you luck, old fellow. But don't be too sure. There's her side of the question; you don't seem to have even thought of that."

It was a ridiculous thing to say. Banks ruminated over it all the way to Market Charlford, sitting beside the chauffeur: for he had particularly wanted to wear that pair of gloves, and they were too tight to drive in. That a woman who had probably never received another proposal — or, anyhow, one that counted, else she would have been married before then — should see any side to his offer, apart from her own dazzling good fortune, was out of the question. Besides, there was that wretched marriage of her brother's; not many men would have overlooked that, though it was certainly not Lydia's fault. And then she had no money: and she was at least thirty-five. Banks felt like a god descending from Olympus as his car rolled up to the Strangs' door: and he got out slowly and with dignity — as he would have said for he was growing stout — rang the bell and asked for Mrs. Strang.

"Mrs. Strang is not at home." Mary spoke

stiffly, but she looked at him with an approving eye. He had been there several times and she guessed his errand. It was time something happened to counteract the mésalliance that had taken place in the family, or her own character might suffer. "Miss Strang is out, too, along with her mamma. But Miss Lydia is at home," she added.

On a sudden Banks felt inclined for flight. It seemed as if he was being nailed down, brought to the point by some unfair means; as if Lydia was sitting there waiting for him. He liked his campaigns to be conducted with deliberate orderliness; had arranged in his own mind to speak to Mrs. Strang first, then to have Lydia summoned to him; had pictured the gratified pride on Mrs. Strang's face: rehearsed her part as well as his own.

It seemed almost indecent that Lydia should be there alone; on the very day he had determined to call and propose; somehow flat like an opera without chorus or orchestra. And he would have handed in his card, murmured some excuse and retreated, had not Mary stood back with the door held wide; so that Banks felt in a way tricked: trapped between her and Simpson, who would be waiting at home to hear his news: fearfully excited and wound up about it all.

Thus, almost mechanically, he advanced into the little hall: and took off his hat. "Will you ask Miss Lydia if she can spare me a few moments?" he said, and hung up the hat with a feeling of having virtually committed himself by the act.

Shown into the stiff drawing-room, he moved about, looking at the china, and humming to himself. It was a good collection, would look well in a panelled room, plain shelves and recesses. Mrs. Strang ought to be generous about the china, as Lydia had no fortune; and Strang would not need it. It was not likely he would marry again. He was the sort old bachelors were made of. That affair with the gipsy had only been an authorised interlude, scarcely worthy of the name of marriage; the fact of there having been any ceremony at all only serving to accentuate the immorality of the whole affair.

He did not expect to see Lydia at once. She would naturally feel flustered, wish to titivate a little. For to him the whole visit seemed so marked, he was so perfectly well aware of his own intentions, that he could not credit any one else with remaining in ignorance: being engrossed in any other affair; while it struck him as scarcely delicate of Mrs. Strang to have gone out in this fashion.

Neither did it seem quite delicate of Lydia to appear so promptly as she did, — it looked almost too eager, — while he was examining the mark on the bottom of a fine piece of old Chelsea.

"How are you, Miss Lydia — eh, what? Quite, *quite* well, I hope."

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Banks." Miss Strang released her hand gently from Banks's, which he had laid one on either side of it. "Mamma will be very sorry to miss you: she and Emma have gone out to

pay some calls this afternoon. But Gilbert will be back soon. Won't you sit down?"

She motioned her visitor to a chair and seated herself, the light full on her face. She was a little lined, her prettiness pinched and faded; quite shockingly dressed, and Banks swelled with his sense of godhead as he drew his chair nearer.

"It's a lovely day, is n't it —?" she began, for she never knew what to talk to him about: had vague ideas that it ought to be something to do with stocks and shares, the very thought of which set her brain in a whirl.

"Lovely, quite lovely. But these autumn days strike me as being a little melancholy — eh, what?" suggested Banks. The idea had sounded well when first mooted to Simpson, and he had matured it during the drive. "Gives one a sense of loneliness; of wanting something to complete life — a sort of fruition, don't you know — eh, what?"

"Yes." Lydia was regarding him with an odd coldness. He was fat and bald: the line of his jaw had already disappeared. He was prosy, prosaic, condescending. The first time he had called she had thought him rather wonderful: such a man of the world, so smart and well groomed. But her brother's brief passion, Merwin's fever of love, had taught her to fear life, and yet to expect more of it than she had ever done before.

A year earlier, if her mother had said to her, "Marry Mr. Banks," she would have married him

almost automatically; without a single critical thought: delivered up her body and soul, saying her prayers quite placidly the night before, with a feeling that it was "nice" to be married; that she was obtaining all, and more, than she had ever expected of life; that it was very kind of Mr. Banks to ask her; and that her only difficulty would be the ordering of the sort of dinners he liked, the mastery of the intricacies of a French menu as an integral part of matrimony.

But now she was afraid: life was not so simple as it had seemed. Her brother's marriage had ended in tragedy; but he had known joy and passion, let himself go for once — though the impetus had not been sufficient to carry him on. And now she wanted to let herself go — completely; or else keep herself completely. She could do without. But she wanted no more half measures. Life had always been tepid: it was no good taking all sorts of risks for more tepidity.

Suddenly all her starved womanhood broke up into a sort of fury against Banks: sitting there, a little on the edge of his chair: so smiling and sure-looking. She wanted one of two things: she wanted him to jump up and tear off those light kid gloves — which made his hands look like nothing human — and take her in his arms, brutally without any asking, crush her to him: kiss her roughly; beat her, shake her: do anything to show her he was alive, to make her feel alive — anything, however shocking!

She wanted this: or else she wanted to attack him: to box his ears, first one side and then the other, just to see how he would look: to take him by his plump, well-tailored shoulders and shake him. Once, years ago, she had stayed in London with some worldly-minded cousins who had taken her to a music-hall, where — at the time — the performance had shocked her beyond words, being young and Pharisaical. She had put away the very thought of it with horror.

But now she remembered. In one duet between a man and a woman, the woman — clad in little beyond a frill and a pair of shoulder-straps — had emphasised her song by chucking the man under the chin with the point of her toe. Suddenly, as Banks rose to draw his chair a little nearer, Lydia Strang was seized with a desire to do the same: to watch his expression while she did it. But, beyond withdrawing her hand gently from his grasp and folding it above the other in her lap, she gave no sign of the volcano which raged within her.

"Perhaps you can guess what I've come for — what I want to ask you?"

"Yes." Again the monosyllable: and Banks wondered, rather impatiently, if she was stupid, or merely intensely shy.

"I think you must have guessed at the state of my affections. I can't offer you a first love: and naturally one does not retain all the passion and romance of youth. But I can offer you a very sincere affection and I believe we shall be very happy. I am quite sure

you will consider my comfort, do all you can to help me."

At this point Lydia rose, and Banks, rising, too, faced her. "I was thinking of taking a house in London, but I dare say we shall be down here a good deal. I've picked up a good many odds and ends, china and such like." His eyes roamed in the direction of the Chelsea and Spode, on either side of the fireplace.

"I am not a gay person: have outgrown that perpetual desire for amusement. But I don't think you are very gay either, and we shall be happy — eh, what? I'm sure we shall be happy in our own quiet way. I'm a bit of a sentimentalist, you know: look forward to my own hearth with the angel beside it." He was holding her hands by now, and bent forward tentatively, as if to kiss her; but she drew back.

Her pale face had flushed, however, while her eyes were brilliant with widely dilated pupils. And suddenly Banks warmed.

"'Pon my soul, I'm very fond of you, Lydia, — you would be surprised if you knew how fond: how excited, elated I feel. How I look forward to our future together. I have got a little present here for you." He drew forth a green morocco case as he spoke. "You told me you liked sapphires and diamonds, and Parrifleet declares that they are lucky, bring happiness. I would n't let him make this — his gold-work always seems to me rather clumsy, and I wanted something very nice — specially nice for

my little sweetheart. He shall make us something for our wedding: a rose bowl or something of that kind — eh, what?" As he spoke he drew a half hoop ring from its nest of white velvet, and endeavoured to slip it on to Lydia's finger.

"Come, come, don't be so shy with me. Why be shy with me — ? There! does n't that look pretty? And then when we're married —"

"I'm not going to — I won't marry you!" Lydia spoke harshly; with all the crudeness of a person who is not used to denying any one anything: like a weak animal driven into a corner, showing fight for the first time in its life.

"But that's nonsense — nonsense — eh, what?" stammered Banks: "You let me put that ring on your finger — let me suppose — what will Mrs. Strang say?"

"I never let you do anything; you persisted. You never even asked me — cared to hear if I loved you. As to Mamma, that will come later." She spoke grimly. Then, as though the thought of her mother had hardened, calmed her, took the ring from her finger, laid it in the palm of her hand, and regarded it curiously.

"It's a very handsome ring, it must have cost a lot of money. Perhaps eighty or ninety pounds."

"Ninety guineas," blurted out Banks.

"Ninety guineas: well, it was a very good guess. Ninety-four pounds ten — it's a great deal of money. But it's not enough. Take it back, please, Mr.

Banks," she went on, and held it out to him between her finger and thumb.

"What do you mean? You don't like it — eh, what?"

"I like it, but it's not enough. Will you take it — no? Well, there!" With a sudden flick of her hand she sent the ring flying to the other end of the room.

"Leave it; you can pick it up later. It's perfectly safe. Even now I've not been quite rash enough to throw it out of the window — we're never quite rash enough to carry anything through to the end, we Strangs," she went on, with a bitter laugh. "But let it stay there while I have my say — for this once. You come here and take it for granted, in the most insolent manner, that I will marry you, without even the formality of asking. The ring was to seal the bargain — am I not right? Ninety pounds. No, I beg your pardon, ninety-four pounds ten!" she laughed; then repeated, "Ninety-four pounds ten! To buy me for life: to keep me at hand for your convenience: to look after your china and order your dinner, and always be there when you want me.

"Do you know what I once heard? That men will sometimes pay women as much as twenty pounds for one night, and you offer me ninety-four pounds ten in exchange for my every night and every day. And the ring still yours if I happened to die first, for jewels like that do not depreciate in value. You come here and offer me this with condescension and magnanimity; because I'm a country

lawyer's daughter, because you think I never had such a chance before. But you're wrong. I've had plenty of chances: more than I could count on the fingers of my two hands; from men above you in position, in wealth, in every way. You think no one's ever loved me, because I did not choose to marry, and am faded and badly dressed. You're not even sorry for me: merely condescending. But you forget this: that I have got what every man desires — a woman's body: the one thing that will always fetch its price. That, over and above this, I have a woman's heart and soul: which is beyond any price that you, or any other man, can pay: excepting by love and service. If I marry, I want a real marriage, with real love and passion: not starvation, with a pretence that is worse than nothing.

"And there's another thing. You think that I'm passée; that I've no experience — and no beauty. But you've never stood back and looked at yourself as you've looked at me. What are your experiences, after all? Paddling and splashing in a pretence of passion — playing bo-peep with life.

"And if I am passée" — Lydia spoke shrilly, a bright spot of colour flaming on either cheek — "and after all, I'm only thirty — do you know what you are? you're more than passée, you're old! — Twenty years older than I am! Fat and ugly, and worst of all, ridiculous. There —" suddenly she came to a pause. "I've had my say."

She whipped out her handkerchief and wiped her

lips. The colour had faded from her face; once more it was a network of fine lines and grey shadows. "I've never spoken out before: I don't suppose I shall ever speak out again: but I'm glad I've done it. I shall suffer for it, Mamma will see to that — but still I'm glad. I've been vulgar — bold — coarse. I did n't know that I knew such things — I never guessed I could feel so. But somehow it hurt — that any one should dare to take my consent for granted as you did. For you don't love me: not in that sort of way. The way I want, have been accustomed to — you know you don't?"

Banks gave her a curious glance: — "No," he said, with sudden honesty. Then he added: — "At least, I did n't": for he was beginning to wonder.

He looked rather ridiculous; his round face whiter than usual and a little flabby, his whole appearance that of a man who has been utterly disconcerted. But suddenly Lydia saw him as a human being: felt sorry for him: realised how she had hurt his vanity: as sensitive, as susceptible to pain, as worthy of consideration as his body, which she would have shrunk from the very idea of torturing.

"I'm sorry." She coloured painfully, twisting one thin hand within the other: miserably ashamed and self-conscious once the unexpected flame, which sprang up within her, had sunk. "I don't know how I could speak to you so — be so unladylike. What would Mamma say!"

"I don't think that matters much — there does

not seem any necessity to tell her," replied Banks: partly animated by a sincere desire to shield Lydia, partly by a dread of appearing ridiculous.

"She will know. But I don't think — I don't feel that I need tell her — repeat all I said."

"You said some very cruel things." Banks rose with a feeling of bewilderment, even dizziness, and looked round for his hat. Then he remembered having hung it in the hall with an almost painful sense of committal. "I think I'd better be goin' — dinner an' all that — eh, what?" Still he hesitated: oddly white, and blinking as though he had received a blow.

Lydia wrung her hands. "I don't know what to say. I can't hope you'll ever forgive me."

A shrewd, rather ugly look came into Banks's eyes. "You mean that you did n't intend — that you've changed your mind?"

"No — no. Oh, no, never — never! I'm only ashamed that I spoke as I did — said so much that was unnecessary, for Gilbert's sake —"

"You need n't think that it will make any difference in my relations with your brother. I'm not quite so despicable as all that — eh, what?"

"No — no — I don't. It was n't really you at all — at least not altogether: everything in life seemed to have been goading me on."

"And I put the finishing touch. Look here, Miss Lydia, I know how it was." Banks spoke with a directness and manliness that he seldom displayed — showing for a moment that under-vein of genuine

kindness that had made Simpson his friend. "I spoke and behaved like a cad. I don't know why, except I suppose I am one. It was n't from any lack of respect for you — that I regarded you lightly. But one gets into the way of discounting a woman's side of things: and the older one gets the worse one becomes. You've given me a lesson. I can't say I liked it; but I can say that I honour you for it. That's why" — for a moment he hesitated, then added with genuine honesty — "I was half afraid you were going to change your mind. I wonder if you understand what I mean — eh, what?"

"I think, perhaps I do," answered Lydia gently.

"I was like a kid that's been spanked: too sore to be touched. Well, I think I'll be goin' now." Once more he looked round for his hat, then remembered, with a real sense of regret. Never again would he feel certain of anything.

"Good-bye, Miss Lydia." He took her hand and held it for a moment between his. Her face was twitching, her nose rather red, her eyes full of tears. But curiously enough, for the first time, he felt a real impulse of love, a desire to take her in his arms and kiss her. "Good-bye, and I hope — perhaps some other fellow will be more fortunate than I have been."

At the door he heard her call him, in an oddly strained voice, and turned.

She was standing in the middle of the floor, her hands clasped in front of her, so tightly that the veins stood out upon them.

"I want to tell you: I feel it's only honest — fair — It was a lie."

Again the curious feeling of disappointment came over Banks — she was like all other women, she had only been drawing him on: and with this thought came a repetition of that same feeling with which he had hung up his hat.

"What do you mean?"

"That — what I told you —"

"Which — what —?"

"That I'd had proposals: men wanting to marry me before — more than I could count on the fingers of both hands. It's not true — it's all a lie — you're the first."

"A poor first!" Banks spoke almost gaily.

"Oh, well, you can't help that," Lydia answered with *gauche* sincerity: hesitated a moment, then added: "And the other — the other thing I told you: about my age —"

"Oh, that does n't matter — is no affair —"

"It does matter: I mean to be honest with you. I'm not thirty, I'm thirty-six — in my thirty-seventh year. Now — that's all. Now you know how much reason I have to be ashamed of myself."

"But, my dear Miss Lydia, one does n't expect a woman — in a case like this —"

"I know —" Miss Strang's mouth twisted into a rather whimsical smile: — "That was the beginning of it. You expected so little, so far as I was concerned — that I scarcely seemed to count. And now

— now I'm going to ask you to go. Mamma will be in in a moment. She said half-past six — she's always punctual — and I'd rather face it out alone."

"Why tell her at all? Why tell her I've even been here?"

"Oh, Mary will tell her that: and even if she did n't, Mamma would know: she knows everything," added Miss Strang bitterly.

Banks reached home and crept into the house by some circuitous route: dreading to meet any one. Lydia Strang had made him feel almost magnanimous at the last; but her words, the fierce fire of her scorn, held too much of truth not to sting. He was fat: he was old. Yes, it was true: he was thirteen stone in weight to only five foot six in height: and he was fifty: still — after her confession — fourteen years older than Lydia, whom he had thought of, even spoken of, as "an old maid."

Dressing that night he fumbled over the tying of his tie, and would not let his man help him. He was exasperated with the fellow: thought he caught him grinning; thought the chauffeur must have guessed his errand and its result; had probably been talking to Mary; told the valet. For the whole affair obsessed Banks so that he imagined the world to be hanging on it.

He even contemplated going to bed, having his dinner sent up to his room. But it would probably be half cold. Then he had brought down some particularly fine salmon from Town, and they would not

send him salmon if they thought he was ill; Mrs. Bliss had fixed and terrible ideas about the feeding of invalids.

So finally he went downstairs: very slowly, rehearsing at every step the answers he would return to the torrent of questions, against which he mentally braced himself.

But no one asked him anything. Gale and Finch talked golf. Parrifleet had seen — or imagined he had seen — some vision which completely engrossed him; and Kirkland never spoke.

As for Simpson, he actually asked him if he had had a good time. And then — displaying a brutal lack of interest in the most vital affairs of his fellow-creatures and complete forgetfulness of the secret which had been entrusted to him — where he had been, and what he had done with himself.

Thus it ended by Banks confiding it all, in the smoking-room after dinner, to each member in turn; waxing quite enthusiastic: shining with a borrowed glow from what he was pleased to describe as "that Lydia Strang's damned fine spirit!"

## CHAPTER XXIX

### AGAR FINCH FORSAKES THE CLUB FOR WHAT SEEM LIKE VERY INSUFFICIENT REASONS

"Oh, by the bye, George, I have an announcement to make to you." It was Finch who spoke, standing before the fire in the library at Fountains, one evening after dinner during the late autumn.

"Eh, what? — What's that, eh?"

"It is to Simpson, as the head of the Club, that I address myself, Banks: though the communication is really more in your line. I'm forced to resign my membership, George, — very reluctantly, — because I have the honour to be the accepted suitor of Miss Lilian Fane." Finch hesitated a moment, and, from his vantage-spot on the hearthrug, gazed round at the little group of members, with a cynical and amused smile. "You don't somehow seem falling over each other in your hurry to congratulate me," he went on: "is it that your feelings lie too deep for tears, or even words?"

Simpson, smoking over the fire, looked up with a puzzled stare; for somehow the tone of the communication did not imply an event calling for any special congratulations.

With twinkling eyes Finch answered his friends' unspoken thought.

"No, you need n't trouble. I once knew an old fellow who said he always waited for two years before congratulating a couple: and then was usually spared the pains. Though I expect we shall jog along all right: we neither of us expect too much."

"But why —?"

"Well, really it's a sort of partnership, which is a very sound basis to start upon. She's got a good deal of money, wants to travel, and does n't like travelling alone. I have very little — unless I grind away at perpetual pot-boilers — and I, too, want to travel. I don't expect that her presence will interfere with me much: personally, you know, I never let any one, or anything, do that."

"But I imagined Mrs. d'Esterre —"

"My dear George, I really did think of that quite seriously," answered Finch in his gentle, even voice. "But the fact of the matter is, Rita d'Esterre knows nothing about me and suspects a good deal — that's why she was attracted. Lilian Fane, on the contrary, knows a great deal and suspects nothing — is not sufficiently interested. It makes life much safer and simpler. I could n't endure a woman with an imagination."

"And yet you yourself have imagination: the soul of an artist, an unerring eye for beauty." It was Parrifleet who spoke.

"Miss Fane's in drawing: her colouring's not up to

much; but then it might put my eye out for my work if it was. She'll be like a plain, neutral-tinted wall-paper in a room; quite a good background for my imaginative works. And somehow, Parrifleet, all my imagination goes into paint: I don't imagine things about people."

"Mr. Finch, don't do it." Parrifleet rose from his chair, moved forward on the hearthrug, and spoke with an emphatic gesture of his hands. "You don't love her."

"She'd be the last person I'd marry if I did," replied Finch, coolly lighting a cigarette as he spoke.

"Well, if you don't love her, you'll hate her: one can't be indifferent over such things. And think what it will mean: your whole life out of harmony, for want of that divine touch upon the strings. Besides that, think of the injury that you will be doing her. To take a woman with no love — no reverence for her in your heart — it's criminal." Parrifleet spoke with almost desperate earnestness.

"Look here, Parry, you're judging others by yourself, which is always a hopeless sort of thing to do. If you married you'd marry for one reason: Simpson for another: Banks for another!"

"By God! if I do marry — if I do, I say — I'll marry for Parrifleet's reason: because I think a gel's a jolly fine gel an' all that — eh, what?" ejaculated Banks.

"But still the reason would be different from Parrifleet's because the girl would be different. The mistake you make is in judging Lilian by the sort of

girl that you'd like your girl to be. Now Miss Fane would be bored to tears by the kind of love you'd give her. She wants to be able to do as she likes and live without her aunt, and go in to dinner before a few other women: she does n't want love, and I don't blame her. Love's like drink. Some people have a taste for it — like to sip here, sip there, same as Banks" — here he hurled a cushion at the wide expanse of white shirt-front which gleamed from the recesses of a deep chair; — "others prefer a great and glorious burst-up — a debauch of love. I'm like that myself. But I don't want to be drunk every day — I don't want love served up at breakfast, dinner, and lunch. That's what it becomes, or is supposed to become, when allied to matrimony: a little drop given in everything — like the way you cure drunkards with brandy.

"Then, again, some people have no taste for it at all: are natural teetotallers. Lilian Fane's one of these. Her heart's nice and shiny and hard like her nails, probably been manicured: her soul's dressed by Lucille, in white illusion run through with entre-deux and pink ribbons. As for warm blood: she's like one of those glass jars you see in the chemist's windows, which appear to be filled with a nice, rich, ruby-tinted liquor — and only hold plain water. It is n't her fault; it's nobody's fault; it's the way she's made."

"Agar, you're talking like a cad," remarked Simpson quietly.

"You wrong me, George," answered Finch calmly, seating himself, crossing one leg over the other, and caressing his neat, silk-clad ankle with pride. "You say that because you think I'm disparaging the lady who is about to honour me by becoming my wife. As a matter of fact, the qualities I mention are just the very ones I want: the sort of qualities which will prevent her ever becoming a nuisance to me or any one else. For really it's the good people, the people with feelings, who are such a damnable bore in the world. After all — on second thoughts — it's you who disparage her by taking it for granted that the qualities you think she ought to have, and not those she has, are the ones that make for perfection."

"You'll not be happy, Agar, put it off — wait a little," urged Simpson, as anxious and worried as though it were his own future at stake.

"Look here, George, marriage is n't going to be my life. It may be the background, as I said. It'll certainly be nothing more. Art's my life: to be able to paint what I like and how I like: to be able to travel: to see the best the world can offer." Finch leant forward with his hands between his knees, his colourless face aglow, his light eyes dilated till they appeared all pupils. "To be able to paint without fear or anxiety at the back of me. To be able to do my best in my own way, and take my own time over it. Human beings simply don't exist in comparison with my work. Let me tell you this: no grief in the world

could wring my soul to such an ecstasy of pain as a great work of art: I don't pay it the tribute of joy or admiration, but of pain. Some one has said, — 'Great art is that before which we wish to die.' Well, that's how I feel. Love! Why this little tin-pot heart and soul of mine is wrung with love when I think of Michael Angelo — Titian, Raphael — the eternal wonder of their work. And that's the sort of feeling you expect me to squander on a woman — a woman with her irksomeness, her petty exactions, her mutability: a skin that sags, eyes that dim. By God, George! if I was to love women in the way you want me to, I'd never paint again. My whole soul would hang aghast upon every wrinkle — I'd commit suicide over the first grey hair."

"There's the mind," said Parrifleet.

"And what is the mind of a woman? A quicksand: a state of eternal vacillation — oscillation, shuffling, shifting; versatile — with an appalling species of cleverness. No — no! Look here, let me tell you fellows this. In matrimony you get one of two things; an angel on the hearth, or a skeleton in the cupboard: and the less you care the less it matters. It may be a hell, or it may be a parlour penance. Or it may be — as I said — merely the wall-paper to one's life; and that's jolly well the safest thing it can be!"

"I believe you're right — right for you." Parrifleet spoke thoughtfully. "I was looking in the crystal to-day — thinking of you — and saw a

fluted pillar, infinitely high, and a clear blue sky: no wavering lights or shadows, no single human face. How different from the cloudy, rainbow-shot vision I encountered when I sought for Mr. Desmond's future." The little man sighed.

"And which do you think the best?" Finch spoke almost defiantly; for, curiously enough, with Parrifleet — alone of all his world — did he feel any desire to justify or defend himself.

"I think your way will be smoother, but still I think his was the better. Though not the best."

"Well, what *is* the best?"

"When self ceases to count."

## CHAPTER XXX

### OF A FASHIONABLE WEDDING AND A TRUE MARRIAGE

FINCH was married early in the new year: Julie, home with her husband on a flying visit from Siberia, being among the guests. "Not because I'm myself," she declared, "but because I'm Van's wife; because Van's father's bogged in money; and some day I may be worth knowing. Everything about this wedding has a reason."

She was talking to Simpson — who had officiated as best man — in the dining-room of Miss Fane's house, where refreshments were served after the wedding; or rather where an array of dainties — as inaccessible as a mirage in the desert — gleamed from between the shoulders and hats of a dense and over-dressed crowd.

"No, I don't want champagne — who wants champagne at three o'clock in the afternoon! I'm dying for a cup of tea — panting with thirst. If you could see my tongue you'd realise that it's blackened. I'd put it out and show you if the bride's eye was n't full upon me. She's every bit as cool and metallic as Mrs. Finch of an hour, as she was as Miss Fane of thirty-odd summers — or winters; somehow it

seems more natural to reckon some people's ages by winters. She knows to a T what every one has on; and whether it's this spring's fashion, or last autumn's done up; that I'm burnt and weather-beaten as a Red Indian: and that the skin on my nose has n't even started to grow again. That's because it got nipped with the frost, and Van persisted in rubbing it with snow. Why, oh, why did he do it?" If it were possible to wail in a whisper young Mrs. Van Rennen wailed — "I don't mean Van and my nose, but Mr. Finch!"

"The Lord only knows," responded Simpson gloomily. "It's no good trying to get anything to eat or drink here, I suppose."

"I wonder if the catering people make a reduction when you tell them you mean to have so many guests that they won't be able to reach the food; so that the whole caboodle can be moved on to the next funeral," interjected Julie morosely.

"We'll go and have a cosy tea when it's all over. She'll be going to change her dress now; and they're bound to catch the four-thirty from Euston. Meanwhile let us find some quiet place where we can hear our own voices."

After some search they found — not exactly a cosy place, but a cubby-hole on a landing, a box room thinly disguised by draperies, and sat down with a sigh of relief. But now that they were in peace they did not seem inclined to talk. Simpson was infinitely depressed. The whole affair seemed

miserably pinchbeck. As for the peaceful life Finch promised himself, Lilian had that sort of jealousy which is compatible with a complete want of heart. She would never be really jealous of her husband; but she could be, and already was, intensely jealous for herself. True, Finch did not deserve much: had given little. But still, in his nonchalant fashion, he was sufficiently honourable to stick to his bargain of utter barrenness, however unbearable it might become; and suffer accordingly, from a long-drawn-out series of petty exactions and continuous nerve-strain worse than any tragedy.

"I never saw such a dismal wedding," sighed Julie, breaking a long silence. "And yet, oddly enough, it is the first wedding that I have n't felt the least inclined to cry at. Somehow it did n't seem real; more like a thing on the stage, with all the actors painfully bored."

"Look here, don't let 's talk about it. Tell me of your life in Siberia with Van Rennen; and how you live and what you do with yourself."

"Do with myself! Work, my good man, work"! Julie leant back; arranged the skirt of her white cloth gown, then raised it a little to show a very neat foot in a black silk stocking and low patent leather shoe, which she gazed at with satisfaction. "If you only knew the delight of being decently dressed once more; after months of an old Norfolk jacket, and skirt to my knees, high boots, an astrachan coat on the top of it all, and a fur cap with flaps tied down

over my ears. Not that I'd like to be always rigged up in this sort of gear; it runs away with too much time. A man took as long to do my hair to-day as I take to get our breakfast, and eat it, and wash up the dishes. But I like Van to see that I can look decent for once, and I'm cultivating a haughty air. Do you notice that? It's wonderful what self-confidence a well-fitting frock gives one — as good as true religion or a balance at the bank. I do look nice, don't I?" She turned to him with an engaging air of candour.

"Very nice, though I expect Van Rennen thinks you look just as nice in your workaday rig. But what 's that you call him?"

"Well, don't you think Archie 's rather an awful name — almost as bad as Bertie — beautiful, bountiful Bertie — or Algy? It's all very well for a man about town in a frock coat: but for a miner in greasy overalls and a dilapidated fur cap, with a week's growth of beard on his chin, it's too incongruous. So I started calling him by his surname — like the workingmen's wives call their husbands; but now it's slipped into 'Van,' and he calls me 'Sal,' or 'old girl.' If ever I have a son I'm going to christen him Bill — just plain Bill; nothing else at all."

For a moment she hesitated, then added, very softly, —

"Early in the summer, I think, Simmy."

Simpson flushed crimson: but Julie's dewy bloom remained unchanged, though her eyes grew soft.

"Are you going back?"

"Yes, the first week in April. And I'm going to stay out there, and live out in the open — live hard and work hard. Simmy, you can't imagine what it's like out there! I could n't sleep when first I came home — what a difference there is between sound and noise. Here in London it seemed all noise and I missed the sound of the running water. The Kerkerod stream is only a stone's throw from our hut, you know; and the Belokoi half a mile farther off — there is a continual duet between the two: I love it! I'd love my child to be born within the sound of it; it goes deeper than any music. Then, seven versts off, is the river Chikoi; sometimes at flood-time, when the wind sets our way, we can hear it booming. And through it all is the swishing whisper or wild whoop of the wind through the pines. Van says it's awfully hot in the summer, though there's always a breeze — and the gnats are awful. But in the winter it's cold — and bites into one and makes one all alive. We have an open fireplace in the hut, with great logs. It smokes abominably; but it's only wood smoke and it smells good. And we've a little kerosene stove for cooking on; and, oddly enough, electric light from the mine. We're going to take out an electric cooking-plant, for the kerosene stinks beyond all words, and my hands always smell of it, and Van says the very eggs taste of it."

"How high up are you?"

"Four thousand eight hundred feet, right up among the mountains. The nearest real shops are at

Petrowski Zavod; but there's a sort of little store near us, just for the mine. The whole thing's our own world. There're the engineers and the accountant and the assayer, and all sorts of hangers-on. Kirkland — you know he's still out there — bosses the whole affair, and we do all the odd jobs. As a matter of fact" — her voice dropped confidentially — "I believe Van does far more than Kirkland, and the men simply love him. It's such fun; he doctors them when they're ill. A short while back he pulled out a tooth for a man, a great raw-boned Slav. It was at night; I held the candle; and what do you think that fellow did? — offered me the tooth as a sign of gratitude. I like the people. I'm always trying to talk to them, plunge headlong into Russian; but I don't know much, make frightful blunders. It's difficult, too, for they're such a mixed crew — the boy who chops my wood speaks three languages. There are Tartars, and Mongols, and Chukchis and Koryaks, Kalmucks, and Kamchadales." Julie rolled out the words with pride, and some music; for the sound of the running water and wind among the pines seemed to have got into her voice, which had lost its shrill girlish note.

"Are there any people of your own sort?"

"No English. The assayer's a German and one of the engineers is a Dane, and the electrician an Italian. They'd all go through fire and water for Van; think no end of him. Do you know what we've really come home for? It's a secret, but he said that

of course you were to be told. He and the engineer have been experimenting over a new machine for wet crushing; there's altogether too much gold dust lost in the present method. He's got a little model — the darlingest thing! I believe he'll make a great success of it." The young wife's voice was deep with pride.

"Well done, Julie!"

"Why, well done?"

"Because it's your doing; he'd never have found himself if it had n't been for you."

"Would n't he, though?" She spoke almost indignantly. "He's got the grit — it was bound to come out: he's like Sir Abel in that; though he favours his mother — as the cottage people say — in everything else. Do you know she actually wants to come out and stay with us; is n't it sporting? Van says he's going to put up another room. We've only got one now — I wonder what the new Mrs. Finch would say to our 'desirable villa residence'! Van's clothes always hung up to dry among the pots and pans: two bunks, one above the other, piled with furs, a bit of looking-glass as big as the palm of my hand; no frills to life."

"Except happiness," put in Simpson softly.

"Oh, that's the woof and warp of the whole shooting match. We're so happy, Simmy, it sometimes frightens me: particularly when the poor old Baron is there, with his desperate sadness; and I remember that he was young once — and happy like we are."

"Who's the Baron? It sounds melodramatic."

"Why, the man who owned the whole place, who first found the gold. It's too heart-breaking! — Death may be dreadful, but sometimes life seems far worse. We pester Providence to be preserved from sudden death; and then, as a grim sort of joke, are given old age and loneliness instead. I'll never pray to be delivered from anything! He lives on there, though at last he's got money enough to go away, simply because he can't bear to leave it. He has an old place, something between a fortress and a castle. He could n't sell that because nobody would ever buy it; he had to sell the mine, and never got enough to work it until he parted with it. Is n't it an irony of fate?"

. Julie's words tumbled out in the old incoherent rush: her face was flushed, her eyes moist with feeling. "Now he's rich, for his requirements, and he can't think of anything he wants to do. Just lives on there with an old man and his wife to care for him: in a place that would take an army of servants and dozens of fires to keep habitable. It's been in his family for centuries: perched up on a crag of the mountain. And from there he can look right down upon the mines, and see the gold that would have saved him and his wife, turned out day after day — why, even from the first of January till we left, the twenty-fifth of March, they got close on twelve thousand ounces — think of that! Something just under fifty thousand pounds. Do you know his his-

tory, — how it all started? His grandfather was a spendthrift, something at the Czar's Court. They say he always drove four horses, with four out-riders; that he had a jewelled ring and a mistress and a different set of furs for every day in the year. Then the Baron's father thought he'd retrench; and broke his heart after two years, trying to pay the old man's debts. When the Baron succeeded, there was nothing left but that rat-haunted place.

"He had been living a gay life in St. Petersburg — there is a pastel of him hung up in that barn of his, such a ripping thing, such a gallant boy! He was engaged to a Court beauty and tried to break it off; but she would n't give him up. They must have loved each other frightfully; his eyes glow even now when he speaks of her. So he gave in, already dreaming over the gold which he felt certain was there, and they married — the poor darlings! — He has a miniature of her, the loveliest patrician creature! — And he took her off to that great empty house among the mountains, for everything had been sold that was worth selling long before that. I dare say they laughed over it and loved each other all the better for roughing it together, like Van and I.

"But it went on and on. They sent away one servant after another, even her own maid. They were always looking for gold; she was out with him in all weathers — people used to see them at the edge of the creek. Sometimes she was on her

knees, in the mud, washing for it with a flat pan. They say she got thinner and thinner and was always coughing. But she would n't give up: they thought she went mad over it: that it got on her brain: that she could think of, care for, nothing else — even the Baron. She used to go about with her beautiful hair all hanging about her face — she had never even done it for herself before she married — get up in the night, seized by some fancy or dream that she knew where the gold was, and go for it by starlight, though she could never have seen it if it had been there. Then at last she was so ill she could n't get up or go out any more: though even in bed her hands would keep moving as if she was shaking the pan. And somehow the Baron got the doctor up from Petrowski Zavod, who said that she must be taken away at once to some warmer place, fresh surroundings. But by the time he was paid there was n't enough money left. Besides she could n't have stood the journey. Every time the Baron comes to see me he tells me the same story — I've some sewing that is stitched through and through with it — and I say the same thing to try and comfort him; that she could n't have stood the journey, for she died only a week later!

"And for twenty years after that — think of it, Simmy! — he went on, for his people's sake, never doubting the gold would be found. Then at last, when he did find it, it was n't placer gold, as he had hoped — mixed with loose sand and gravel and easy

to work — but quartz gold; all among slate and rock and frightfully expensive to deal with. He did get started. Do you remember Kirkland telling us of it under the chestnut tree at Fountains? — What ages ago it seems! What a misty sort of dream Siberia was then, and now it's my home. But though the peasants loved him so that they started working for nothing, it could n't go on: he felt it was n't fair to them and it made him miserable. So he sold it all. And there we are, young and happy, in his place. It gets on my conscience, though the Lord knows it is n't my fault. I feel we have no right to it; not only the place but the luck. For there is n't a single cloud anywhere. It frightens me sometimes. I tell Van I wish he'd pretend to beat me — anything, so that we might n't appear to be so blatantly happy and prosperous. Oh, there *is* Van. Look! does n't he look a dear! He's got ever so much broader — has n't he?"

Julie had risen to her feet, and now craned over the banister, waving an urgent hand to her husband.

"I was just telling Simmy" — she went on as he joined them — "about the Baron, and what a swine I feel about it all: suggesting that you should pretend to starve me, beat me — anything."

Van Rennen grinned: — "As if any one 'ud believe it! They all know the boot's on the other foot. If you'd only seen the things I was expected to eat, first go off, Simpson."

"Oh, well, you've thrived on it. Your looks don't pity you, as the village people say. What's happening down there?"

"Why, the whole thing's over. They'll be sweeping us out if we stay much longer. The happy couple have gone. I can tell you that there was a great hunt for you, Simpson: all sorts of things that it was the best man's business to do; and you not there to do them."

"Oh, I say, I am sorry! I hope Finch was n't put out."

"Could anything put Finch out? He went off, as blandly indifferent to every one and everything as though it had been some total stranger's wedding. The only fear is that he'll forget his new acquisition and leave her behind at some station or other, or in the cab."

"She won't be left — she's not that sort," interjected Julie scornfully. "Look here, I tell you what I'm going to do. You two can take the motor and go to your Club, and have tea and a talk and all those sort of things that men can't live without."

"But that's what we're to do!" objected her husband. "Do you hear her — eh, Simpson? Do you hear the way she bosses me? As if even a heathen Chinee would be imposed on — beat *her*, indeed!"

"Shut up — it's part of my general modesty to leave myself to the last. I'm going to take a taxi and go down and have tea with Dorothy. I may be back to dinner — and then again I may n't; it all

depends on whether I can get her to come out with me or not."

"There speaks a modern wife!"

"Yes, and thank your stars you've got her. I wonder what you'd have done with an Early Victorian piece of sentimentality clinging ivy-like to your arm."

"Ivy does n't cling to arms," objected Van Rennen. "Ivy —" But Julie was already at the bottom of the stairs, shaking hands in the most languid and approved fashion with Mrs. Cubitt, who — now that her niece was gone — had somehow, like a forlorn wisp of flotsam, drifted into public view.

# PART III

## CHAPTER XXXI

### LYDIA STRANG TAKES HER FATE INTO HER OWN HANDS ONCE MORE

EARLY in May, Banks was laid up with a bad attack of gout: curiously enough, for he had eaten and drunken less the last few months than ever before, since he left school. This was partly owing to Parrifleet's influence, and partly to the sting of Lydia's words: the sudden realisation of himself that they had brought with them. Formerly he had seen himself in the glass through the proud eyes of his tailor: all at once it seemed that the ugly flesh became evident beneath the immaculately cut clothes.

Parrifleet, gently satirical at the expense of the fanatics of his own faith, told the story of a famous occultist who had publicly refused to eat green peas at a dinner party — "Because the entity of the green peas is antagonistic to my own entity," being the reason that he gave.

It was easy to pass the peas. It is not easy to pass one's self: and the entity of Banks's body began to be at odds with his budding soul — which Finch pictured treading the golden floors of heaven in white spats. He had always eaten and drunken, not because he was hungry or thirsty, not even because he

was tempted; but because the food was there, and he was all over it without waiting to ask "why?" He would have gobbled up Lydia Strang in the same fashion had she not defied him: surprising him by her action as thoroughly as though an oyster had suddenly sat up on his plate and insisted on its own right to an individual life.

Now he had reformed. But, as so often happens, his pleasant vices swung round with a sting in their tails and caught him as they went.

The worst was over, or so the whole household devoutly hoped, and he was out in a long chair on the terrace — grumbling at the spring sun, which was too hot, and the spring winds, which were too cold — when Strang and his younger sister happened to call.

Simpson — divided between a benevolent wish not to leave Banks too much alone and an overwhelming desire to get away from his eternal egotism — was at the end of a long afternoon spent writing letters in the library, when Jervis announced them: — "Mr. and Miss Strang": adding: —

"I've shown them into the morning room, sir, and please, sir, shall I serve tea?"

"Yes; and where's Mr. Finch?"

"Mr. Finch is down in the walled garden sketching, sir. Mrs. Finch has gone out in Mr. Banks's motor, and said she would n't be back till late," replied the man.

For Lilian was staying there with her husband; a

fact which they none of them could ever remember. They were surprised when she came in to breakfast: went in to dinner without her; completely forgot her in making up their plans for the day: that is, unless Jervis reminded them; which he seemed to take an almost malevolent pleasure in doing.

At first Simpson wondered if Finch also forgot, and came to the conclusion that he did n't, though he tried to: the fact that the sound of his wife's footsteps, the rustle of her skirt, set him twitching with irritation, even before the others heard her, being sufficient indication of where his thought lay. Still, he never spoke to Simpson of his married life; and was magnificently polite to Lilian when she was present. Indeed, the petty pretence of forgetting her existence was the only outlet that he allowed himself. Though sometimes, when her chatter became intolerable, fretting like a file on his overstrained nerves, he would get up and slip quietly from the room.

As a matter of fact she obsessed him: came between him and his work; ruined what he had given his life to perfect. He had imagined that the fact of there being no love in his marriage would leave him free. He was as free as a man in the Desert of Sahara: with his mouth full of sand — Lilian's petty exactions: shrivelled up by the scorching wind of her utter selfishness. No love in the world could have demanded more than she did, in return for the partial use of her three or four thousand a year.

A night or two before he had spoken to Simpson, with unusual feeling, of the effect of dislike. Some one else had started the subject, apropos of nothing in particular, but his words held a bitter personal note.

"Hate may be almost ennobling: may lead to love or death; to the summit of one's ambition, to almost any great thing. But dislike is like a slow cancer, which poisons and never quite kills. Like the accumulation of port wine in your system, Banks," he went on, laughing; as he realised that the others were listening. "Another hogshead or two and something exciting might happen; but you've stopped at the wrong moment: and all your molecules, or whatever you call them, have got the staggers in consequence."

The afternoon that the Strangs called, he entered the morning room just after Simpson; and sat chatting to Lydia, while he poured out tea with that delicate, neat-fingered air which once made Kirkland describe him as the most "ladylike man" he ever met.

Simpson — wondering what to say and how to keep clear of the past, and Merwin, who seemed to be regarded as even more disgraceful than most dead people — talked to Strang, who after a few words of agonised remorse and sorrow had once more relapsed into the complete lawyer, immersed in that petty daily round where litigation takes the place of religion; while with one ear he listened to Finch, who,

for some reason or other, was in one of his most whimsical moods.

He began with the village and the people; went on to the Club and its members, giving the latest news of Julie and Van Rennen; sheared off to Town gossip; and finally reached fashions, exemplifying his belief that everybody liked being talked to about things of which they knew nothing: though in this respect Lydia had certainly improved.

"It's an age of line, you know, — even the hats must be completely at one with the nape of the neck: the Church is the only thing that's expected to be broad nowadays," he declared. "A little more cream, a very little: a mere suspicion; I don't offer you more because I want it myself. People talk about the milk of human kindness; but it's nowhere in its humanising effects with the cream of Simpson's Alderneys. If there's any one thing for which I have to thank Providence, it is that I'm thin enough to drink cream at every meal. Poor old Banks, now, was clearly designed for skim milk."

"Mr. Banks has n't been here for some time."

"He's here now making all our lives a burden by reason of his great toe — the left toe, too!"

"How do you mean? What is it?" Miss Strang's simple face bore a look of complete bewilderment, though Finch observed that she flushed, and he chuckled.

"Suppressed gout: or so the doctor says. But I believe he's mistaken; they get into the way of tabu-

lating things like that; and Banks looks a gouty subject, I allow. But all the same I think he's mistaken. I don't believe it's gout at all. I believe" — his voice dropped to a whisper — "that it's feelings! — suppressed feelings. I've sometimes thought that we none of us quite understand poor Banks!" And he sighed.

"Is he laid up—is he in—" Lydia hesitated: she had her brave moments, but for all that she lacked the courage to mention the word "bed" before three men.

"No, he's not in—oh, no, not at all; by no means," answered Finch. "He's out on the terrace. By the way, Simpson, has Banks had any tea yet?"

"Not yet: just touch the bell, will you, and Jervis will take it to him."

"There's an extra cup here. Jervis must have thought we'd take it. I put in five spoonfuls and one for the pot." He spoke with apparent irrelevance; the silver teapot poised above the empty cup. But at the last word he turned a glance of mocking challenge full upon Lydia Strang. "Poor old Banks," he added: "it seems a shame to leave him to the servants like that: ill and all!" Here he quirked one little finger elegantly, raised the pot yet higher, and began to pour out the tea.

Lydia flushed crimson. She knew she was being dared. And a sudden determination took her that she would not be laughed out of doing what she wanted to do.

"I'll take it. I'd like to take it. Is he in the front? Does he take cream and sugar — Oh! and cakes, and bread and butter."

She spoke quickly, decisively, though with such nervousness that the words tumbled out one over the other.

"Oh, but we could n't think of allowing you, Miss Strang," began Simpson. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he paused; while Strang, sitting in a low chair, stared up at his sister curiously.

"Oh, I'd like to take it. It's very hot in here; I'd like a little air — the garden —"

She had heaped a plate with food; and now, picking up the cup which Finch had filled, was moving towards the door when Simpson interposed.

"At least, let me carry the cup as far as the side door," he said; took it from her shaking hand, preceded her through the dining-room and across the hall; then stopped in the porch; indicated Banks's broad back; and gravely poured the tea, which had been slopped in the saucer, back into the cup.

"I'm afraid it will be cold," ventured Lydia.

"I'm sure it will be sweet," responded Simpson gallantly; and handed it to her with twinkling eyes, and that formal, old-fashioned bow in which Julie so delighted.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### BANKS IS ACCEPTED WITH MODERATE ENTHUSIASM

As Banks heard the rattle of the cup, he threw a back-handed growl over his shoulder. "At last. What the devil — "

Lydia stiffened and flushed: not altogether with horror, rather with the pleasant feeling that here was the one person she could dare to do battle with.

"I wonder that they'll do anything for you if you speak like that," she remarked severely; and moved forward towards the front of the long chair.

Banks started and stared: — "Miss Strang! This is good of you! I had no idea. I thought it was one of those fools of servants."

"I don't think servants are fools. Mary's not: I sometimes wish she was." Lydia laughed as she set her load down on the grass.

"I must push up your cushions a little, or you won't be able to drink," she said. And with a feeling of tremendous daring she settled them so that Banks, whose spine seemed strangely affected by the one swathed foot, could sit upright; then handed him the cup of lukewarm tea, folded a piece of bread and butter and laid it on the saucer: "I'll hold the plate while you eat that."

"But you can't stand; I can't have you standing. Galling to be so helpless — eh, what? But won't you sit down on the end of my chair? Look" — and he actually moved a trifle — "there's plenty of room."

Lydia seated herself gingerly. "What will you say if I shake your foot. Gentlemen are terribly ill-tempered when they have gout; or so I've heard."

Banks liked the way she said "gentlemen." All the women he knew spoke of "men." Even in her daring she was refined; reminding him of the Chelsea china in her old-fashioned primness. "And if you swear again I'll go away and leave you," she added with spirit.

"I won't swear again: why should I — with you here?" he asked fatuously.

"Well, drink your tea and don't talk."

Banks obeyed; while she watched him, quite oblivious of what he would have said had Jervis brought him his tea in such a fashion, instead of on a tray, with a teapot and cream jug of his own, and plenty of hot buttered cakes.

"Some more?"

"No, thank you."

"Then I'll take the things back to the house," remarked Lydia; and was rising, with decision, when Banks caught at her hand.

"No, don't go. Look here, I —"

"You'll upset that cup in a minute." She took it from him and put it under the chair along with the plate of disregarded cakes. Banks was excited, al-

most trembling; it was delightful to feel her power. She had once been very nasty to him. She determined that she would sometimes be nasty to other people, too: it gave her a feeling of self-reliance and courage, which she had never gained by merely giving in.

"Look here, why did you bring out my tea?—it was awfully good of you, and all that. But why did you?"

"I'm used to going to see people when they're ill. I would n't sit up quite so much if I was you, Mr. Banks: they say that gout sometimes affects the heart."

"It's not the gout that affects my heart," declared Banks solemnly. "It's you."

"Oh, I'm quite safe," answered Lydia; and laughed in a heady sort of way that would have amazed her mother. She was again in grey, that colour which can effect so much or so little. But this time her dress fitted: while her black hat was shady, softening her face, and there was a touch of blue in it, which brought out the colour in her eyes: much as her one love affair had brought out her character, with its wholesome streak of vanity. "I'm not nearly as dangerous as gout," she added and laughed again.

"'Pon my soul, I believe you've hurt me more — oh, damn!"

"What is it?" Lydia rose with a glance of exaggerated anxiety.

"Nothing; only you touched my foot." Banks

drew in his breath sharply: for a moment the pain was intolerable. Then he caught an odd look on Lydia's face. "You did it on purpose."

"Oh, no."

"I know you did it on purpose. Well, you're right; it did hurt — devilishly! But I still maintain that it's not half so hard to bear as your scorn was — that day, do you remember — eh, what?"

"It was very good for you."

"I know it was good for me. I've realised that all the time. But, by Jove, I've realised it more since I've lain here, ill and alone, week after week." — It was exactly five days since the first twinge; and he had kept Simpson and Parrifleet and Mrs. Bliss and Jervis and a doctor in constant attendance: but lovers are licensed liars. — "I've realised what a cad, what a brute I was! — All that I've lost."

"If I'd known I'd have come. If I'd known you were ill, I mean."

"You would — honest — eh, what? Well, I'm not well yet by a long chalk — weeks, months, the doctor says. Got to get it out of the system and all that, you know. Baden-Baden, so he says — banishment, that's what I call it."

"Where exactly is Baden-Baden?"

"Somewhere in Germany," answered Banks loosely. "Warm baths, mineral springs, — all that. Gale went there: did n't do him any good — poor chap's dying, so they say. But I suppose if one has a doctor one must do as he says — eh, what?"

"You can't go alone: you're not fit."

The invalid sighed stupendously, and gazed up into her face; but for once he had the sense to hold his tongue. For a moment or so there was silence, then Lydia spoke.

"Tell me, why did you ask me to marry you last autumn?" she asked, with a feeling of delicious calmness and exaltation.

"Because I wanted a wife."

"Any wife?"

"That's not fair. I — you know, I — " Banks squirmed; then with an effort of honesty met her eyes fully. "Yes, any wife — there!"

Lydia stooped with a decisive jerk and picked up the cup and plate. "Then you'd better get any wife to marry you and go out to Baden with you. You're no more fit to go about the Continent alone than a babe unborn: with gout and all. There's no knowing what it will go to, with the food they'll give you in those places. I used to have a respect for foreign cooking; but I've been studying it a bit lately — and it's not fit for any but heathens."

"Why did you study it? — Foreign cooking, of all things — eh, what?"

"Everything comes in useful some time or other. I'd better send some one to fetch you in: all the sun's gone off you now." She moved a step away: then turned. "And you think over what I've said and get hold of that 'any wife' of yours — if she'll have you."

"Lydia!" Banks caught hold of her arm, while the cakes and bread and butter slid from the plate onto his knees. But he did not notice that: neither did Lydia notice — as he pulled her down onto the edge of his chair — that she sat on one; luckily only an innocuous sponge: though woman-like she retained more presence of mind than he did, and lowered the cup and saucer onto the turf, out of harm's way. "Lydia, it was different then! I wanted to marry: I liked you and I thought — the Lord only knows what I thought — But it's true I did n't love you. I just wanted a wife. But now I do love you: I believe I loved you from that very day, though I did n't want you to change your mind then. You 'd got yourself up onto a pedestal somehow. But all the time I've wanted you. By Jove, I never knew that I could want any one so much. Of course, I'm too old for you — eh, what?"

"Yes."

"And fat and ugly."

"Yes."

"I don't think you need say it like that. It's not exactly kind."

"I — Oh, I was n't listening, was n't thinking what I was saying. I was just wondering when you 'd got to go to Baden."

"The middle of the month, the doctor says."

"If you could put it off to the end" — Lydia's face was grave with untold calculation — "we might manage it."

"Then you will marry me?"

"Well, you can't go alone, like that, can you?"

Banks pulled her down and kissed her. Her black hat was all awry as she released herself; but her blue eyes were full of colour, her cheeks flushed. She looked very young and pretty: so young and pretty that he experienced a qualm of self-depreciation.

"You don't — you could n't love me? What could you see in me?"

"I don't know," confessed Lydia gauchely; and stood for a moment looking down at him, with an odd expression, as if half puzzled, half amused. "Well, anyhow, I brought you out your tea," she said, as though that were an adequate reason; then, with sudden audacity, stooped and kissed him. "But somehow I do love you; I suppose it's because I'm sorry for you."

Banks winced.

"Yet not altogether that: more because you make me feel that nobody will have any right to be sorry for me any more. You make me feel somebody; and after thirty-five years of Mamma, that alone's worth having. But it is n't only that either." She stooped again and for one moment laid her cheek against his. "It's just somehow because you're you. And, of course, if you were very young and handsome and all that, you would n't love me," she added, while Banks grinned feebly, with the expression of a child who finds the powder at the bottom of his spoonful of jam.

And this was as much, in the way of flattery, as he got; either then or at any other time. A fact which drew out his love for his wife till it became a lifelong habit; though, curiously enough, she never knew how or why she ruled him.

"Another!" said Simpson, when they told him of the engagement, and sighed: though he was glad; for somehow other people's happiness made his own ultimate success seem the more possible.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### PARRIFLEET AND THE LADY OF THE OPAL

It was seven o'clock in the morning, about a week after the engagement; and Parrifleet had been sitting up all night in his little kiosk in the park, busied over a pendant; an opal, set in a filigree of silver, which was to be one of Banks's many presents to his bride, for he was one of those people whose affection is expressed by more or less showy gifts.

The wedding was fixed for the first of June. There was no great hurry for the ornament to be finished; but first the silverwork, then something of the mysterious depths of light and shade in the stone, fascinated Parrifleet, who had slipped away back to his workshop directly dinner was over. And he was still there: not that he had been working all night; but he had been brooding, dreaming over it; taking down one of his books after another and reading all they had to tell of opals; sitting with the stone in his hand; the electric light, shaded at one side, turned full upon it — "realising it," as he would have said; while the flame in its midst seemed to leap out and fuse with some flame of life in himself.

It was intensely quiet. The one window and door were wide open. Now and then there came the rustle

and twitter of a bird, and towards two o'clock the soft breath and passing step of cattle, restless as the earth turned in its sleep, seeking fresh pastures. But otherwise the silence could almost be felt. There was no moon, and the world outside was a mere space of deep indigo sky, with the dim bulk of trees upreared against it, and a deep mass of indistinguishable earth.

The little kiosk had taken upon itself much of the aspect of the room at Clifford's Inn, save that there were more books. But by night there was little to be seen; for the one light — which left the eight angles of the walls untouched: with darkness sitting brooding like a sulky child in each corner — was concentrated full upon Parrifleet's hands, which lay upwards, one upon another; the opal, misted round with a fairy work of silver, in the palm of the uppermost; his back and the lower part of his figure being in shadow, with the light laid in a flat wash over his face.

To say that he worshipped the stone is to credit him with idolatry; but certainly he worshipped it as much as any idolater ever worships any image, icon or relic: as a fire worshipper worships fire — for what it symbolises: as a Catholic adores the image of Mary, not for itself but for what the original may grant to him. Nay, more, for it seemed that he not only drew some mysterious influence out from the stone, but breathed into it that which augmented its powers, for the flame seemed to leap and quiver beneath his gaze.

In Mexico it is believed that the opal is the soul of truth. And it was truth that Lydia and Banks both needed: the courage to see life as it really is, neither corseted, nor dished up with truffles. It is also the stone of love — and they still had far to travel on that path — uniting in its many shades the virtues of all the stones with whose tints it is blazoned, the strength of the ruby, the prosperity of the turquoise, the faithfulness of the emerald.

After a while the thought of Banks and Lydia faded away, and it seemed to Parrifleet that he was alone with the opal: that they were two intensely vital, quite separate, and yet harmonious entities: that this stone meant more to him than any other stone had ever meant before: that it was the very centre and source of his life: while not only was it wonderful to him, but he was wonderful to it; drawing out the soul of it; that wonderful wavering flame which dwelt beneath the flakes of many-coloured crystal — as new life dwells beneath the superposed tissues of a tulip-bulb — for some definite end.

Of course, he was mad: all such super-devotees are mad. But this is what he believed: that the flame of the opal — which he knew to be its soul — drew itself out from the stone which lay upon his palm, and in a flood of light gathered to the form of a woman, the most beautiful he had ever seen: or so he believed, not only at that moment, but always.

No one ever contradicted him. Parrifleet's soul seemed about as much allied to his frail body as a

butterfly to the flower on which it alights: any harsh word or movement might frighten it away. And people felt that; though they none of them put it so poetically as this. They said he had "a bee in his bonnet": that it would not take much "to set him off the top"; it was safer to "humour him"—and things like that.

As for Simpson, even when he did realise what really had happened, he did not say anything either: for to him, also, the beauty of this particular woman seemed little short of supernatural.

As a matter of fact, the blaze of light was caused by the sun having just topped the trees, pouring full in through the open door, putting the electric light to shame.

But without doubt the woman was there: dressed in a white dress that to Parrifleet's eye might have come straight from heaven. As a matter of fact, it was Paris, which is much the same thing. That Paris which can design morning dresses of so enchanting a simplicity that they would make a Little Ilkley frock appear almost dissolute.

She wore no hat. The sun at the back of her head touched the outline of her fair head with a nimbus: and she was smiling.

"Good-morning."

Without a word Parrifleet rose and stood looking at her, with reverence and a sort of pride: more than half believing that she was of his own creation.

"You are very early at work."

"I've been at work all night."

"I think I know who you are: you are Parrifleet the jeweller, who makes and believes in beautiful things — or do you make them by believing in them?" There was a whimsical lift at one corner of her mouth as she put the question, and Parrifleet laughed.

"Now you're asking what even I don't know."

"May I come in?"

"Of course," he answered, and she moved inside; bending her head a little beneath the heavy beam at the doorway.

"Why do you do that? — it's not as low at it looks."

"I know; it's a habit. Every one laughs at me, but I always dip when I come through a door."

"You were taller last time," remarked Parrifleet in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone.

"Do you believe that?"

"Certainly; don't you?"

"Of course. I believe I even remember what I was. I was a sailor. I know the oddest things about ships: things no one has ever told me. All the doorways, hatches — whatever you call them — were low — there was one under the break of the poop —" She hesitated a moment, with a far-away look in her eyes. "I dream of it all at night: the great curving waves, and the wind in the rigging. I believe — don't tell anybody" — her voice dropped to a confidential, laughing whisper — "that if ever I had to go under chloroform, I should swear — great round mouth-

filling sailors' oaths." There was a moment's pause: then she leant across the table and looked at the opal which lay in Parrifleet's hand.

"What a lovely thing!"

"Yes," agreed Parrifleet gravely; "but the heart's gone out of it." And he laid it gently on the table.

"The heart of an opal —?"

"Is the soul of truth. Do you know anything of precious stones?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"Well, you must know —" he began; and launched forth on his beloved subject, his pale face aglow.

For the best part of an hour they talked. Then, suddenly, as it seemed to Parrifleet, she said she must go, and she went.

"Where?" queried Finch, who was listening to Parrifleet with evident, though affectionate amusement: lolling half in and half out of the dining-room window, — while Simpson plied the visionary with a long-deferred breakfast, — for Mrs. Finch was back in Town again, and he was sketching and idling in the apparently desultory manner which always produced his best work.

"Where? Oh, I don't know; it does n't matter, does it?"

"Not unless you want to see the lady again."

"I shall see her again. Marmalade! Please, Mr. Simpson — there never was, or will be, another such food." For a moment or so the little man ate in silence: then took up his subject again.

"Of course, I shall see her. There are people in life one never more than just brushes by: from whom one gains nothing; to whom one gives nothing. People who, though they may be the pivot of another's life, — and that's always very difficult to realise and remember, — are no more to you than a faintly pencilled drawing. You may be introduced to them again and again, know all their relations, their personal history, admire and approve. But that is all. It is no use arranging meetings; striving to know each other better: you'll never get any nearer. Love and friendship are as inevitable as all else in this inevitable world. You may first meet at the Antipodes, and each go opposite ways — perhaps without even speaking. But if you are native to each other you will meet again and again. People lose half their energy in contriving and planning. They are like men who would try to hurry on an express train by getting out and pushing: or — to use a very homely simile — like certain impatient persons, who, instead of waiting for a 'bus, imagine they save time by walking on, so that it may overtake them."

"Your principle is that everything comes to those who wait; or else they wait so long they forget what they're waiting for, eh?" mocked Finch. "All the same, Parrifleet, I think it's distinctly unchivalrous to just sit tight and let the lady come to you: though no doubt it strengthens your position."

"We don't think of those sort of things: those petty manœuvres of petty minds."

"We —? So that 's what it 's arrived at — already! I see it all now. It means another wedding present. A conglomeration of Artemis and Endymion, a Registry Office and silver cruets from Elkinton's."

"Not for me, Mr. Finch." Parrifleet glanced at Simpson and smiled. For there was a girl in Putney: a curiously matter-of-fact, quiet, middle-class young woman. Simpson had been taken out there to tea one day, and wondered where the attraction could lie; though after a while he realised the sense of rest that her calm good sense afforded to a man of Parrifleet's calibre; the beneficent attraction that the abnormal feels towards the priceless virtues of the commonplace. Yet for all that, Parrifleet was but human.

He caught the doubt in Simpson's eye and smiled. "Oh, no. Believe me I have some idea of congruity: of the place I am in now, on this special plane, and the place to which she belongs."

He rose from the table as he spoke, and pushed back his chair; then stood for a moment in his most characteristic attitude: his head a little drooping, his eyes raised and fixed on Simpson. "No, no. Though our orbits run parallel, they never actually touch. There is some other influence — what I do not know: feel that I have no right to enquire. Though I wonder —" He hesitated a moment: then added, as if putting aside some idea which had momentarily diverted his thoughts: "But I shall see her again; that goes without saying."

And he was right. For the very next day "the Lady of the Opal" — as he called her — came again to the kiosk; and lingered, talking and watching him at work. And again and again for several days; while he recounted each meeting to the others; showing absolutely no fear, either of disbelief or ridicule.

"I 'd like to see this paragon. I love mystery! And beauty and mystery in conjunction are irresistible. Why not bring her home to tea? I suppose she does eat and drink occasionally," suggested Finch one day; but more to please Parrifleet than from any feeling of real curiosity. For though they all loved him, in this one respect they all — even Simpson — quite insensibly showed their realisation of the difference between their rank and his; they had no confidence in his judgment of women; as he knew; and smiled over the knowledge.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### FOUNTAINS COURT BECOMES SIMPSON'S OWN PROPERTY

THE 10th of June had come round once more, and never had Fountains Court appeared more perfect. Some old writers speak of a beauty as being "in face." Such a term would have suited Fountains at this time. There had been a quantity of soft-falling rain in May. The growth was fresh and luxurious, just at the very zenith of its perfection: the Italian garden ablaze with bright, low-growing plants; the herb-garden, soberer in tint and infinitely sweet; the herbaceous borders a masque of colour.

Simpson had been busied over the garden ever since he took the place; not only giving Bliss an ample number of helpers, but himself seeing to everything: planning and working incessantly; getting more pleasure out of it than he could have believed possible.

Months before, Finch had let fall a few casual words as to the effect of colour. "Red loses all its brilliance in the shade, is the first colour to die out when the sun goes. Plant white, and all the graduations of lavenders and blues and purples — and perhaps pale yellow, such as the evening primrose —

beneath the trees: — think of the effect of periwinkles or bluebells in a shady wood! Keep your scarlets and crimsons and oranges for the sunny places, Simpson. People call them hot colours, and they're right: they have an affinity for light and heat. That's all they go with, as the Indian natives know; they're not afraid of hot colours."

Thus there were shady places with all the pale and tender hues; and blazing borders jutting out into the green turf. And sweetness everywhere. And everywhere — billowing over the walls of the herb-garden, over every unsightly tree and arch and pergola, pushing aside the other plants in beds and borders — were roses. Such a plenitude of roses that the whole air smelt of them.

The garden was, indeed, at its highest point of perfection: the inside of the house shining with a smug air of self-conscious cleanliness after the spring upheaval, during which Mrs. Bliss had condemned Simpson to a miserable three weeks' banishment.

Now the frame was perfect. But it was empty. Finch, once the most constant occupant, was in London, more nonchalant and bored than ever; though there was something of real unhappiness in his face which made Simpson anxious. Now and then he would take himself off to the Continent, or down to Cornwall on some sketching expedition. But it seemed that he did not have much time: that he was everlastingly painting portraits; as though the ugly drudgery of art had only been increased by his

marriage, proportionately with Lilian's spending capacity.

He never complained, was always perfectly polite to his wife, whose stream of aimless talk had gathered a shriller note, while her old habit of always lighting on the subject which people most wished to avoid was marked by a spiteful deliberation which it had before lacked. For somehow it seemed that they had neither of them got what they bargained for.

Gale had almost finished his Oxford work — work which was to bring him fame — climbed to the highest point of success; then been flipped off by the cynical finger of Fate. One lung was completely gone, the other touched: if he wanted to live he must get away out of England. Every doctor said the same, for he had tried many in the vain hope that all the others might be proved wrong; and finally — desperately desirous of life, though he declared that he could see no reason for wanting to live — he had drifted to California where he started fruit farming in a spirit of bitter antagonism.

Van Rennen and his wife were back in Siberia: and a week earlier Simpson had received a telegram with: — "Love from Bill: all well." Banks was off on his honeymoon. Even Parrifleet was away, over in Boston attending a conference regarding some new — and, as it seemed to Simpson, peculiarly backboneless — sect, which believed that the entire human race was evolved from the precious stones mentioned as the foundation of the New Jerusalem:

in their first essence emanations from the Heavenly Being Himself; and about to become, in their last visible presentment, super-men and women.

By this time no one would have objected to the presence of ladies at Fountains. Indeed, it had lost all semblance of a celibates' club; for Finch and his wife, and Julie and Van Rennen had both stayed there; while Dorothy ran down for an occasional breath of country air, drawing upon herself an unfailing visit from Mrs. Cartwright, for the express purpose of remonstrating with her on the unconventionality of her behaviour: a purpose which frizzled out to nothing under Dorothy's calm and aloof gaze.

"Of course, she's almost a nun," the old lady remarked to her husband. "And nuns and nurses and artists and all those sort of people seem to think they can do anything. Talk about the stage! Myself, I think that actresses are much more careful of appearances. Think how awkward it would be if Mr. Simpson married her. It would set the whole county talking. Really, one would scarcely know whether to call on her, and yet, — I'm sure she's really quite nice."

But, excepting for Dorothy and the two married ladies, there seemed no desire to invade Simpson's solitude; which increased, though he drifted in and out of perfunctory sort of acquaintanceships with the people who lived round, in those big houses set in an oasis of park: which, separating them from the common herd, differentiated them as "county."

But though he was solitary, he was not lonely. His days were full; and the villagers — despite the fact that they had destroyed his every illusion regarding the guilelessness of the rustic mind — interested him. They were so circuitous and long-winded, — having a habit of thought which impelled them to say all that they had to say over one shoulder, as they walked away: beginning with a conventional greeting when they came abreast of him, and reaching the grist of their complaint, need, or scandal, in a bellow, when they were at least twenty yards distant.

Then they were so clumsily cunning in all that they did; showing a childish slyness, which would have been amusing, if it had not been at once pathetic and exasperating.

The illegitimate child of a daughter was a "nephew" or "niece," spoken of with a peculiar leer, quite sufficiently explanatory: an unalterable ne'er-do-well a "chronic." They would beg for an extra room onto their cottages because the children were growing up — and it did n't seem right allowing them to sleep together; then let it to a lodger. If they wanted a new copper in the back kitchen or a coat of whitewash, it was never the person who asked for it who appeared to want it.

It was always: — "I ain't not got no complaints to make. But Mrs. Jones, she came in t'other day an' she did say — an' there ain't no denyin' as she spoke the truth, savin' your presence, sir — that it

were in a real muck; an' the Rector he do say the same. An' the missis she do always be on about it: only this very mornin' she says to me, she says, says she —" etc., etc.

Sometimes it amused Simpson to circumvent these people. But every day he was growing more tolerant: recognising the old slave spirit at the bottom of all their petty deceptions; the pitiful smallness of a life where so much trouble could be taken for so little; and did what was asked of him.

Though it was not his business.

But money seemed to be scarce at Little Ilkley, which, for the most part, belonged to the owner of Fountains; and wages were appallingly low, while dilapidations were piling up each day.

The will to help did not appear to be lacking. The agent, an old man, long past his work and painfully ignorant of all the expectations of modern life, tinkered and patched perpetually at cottages which ought, by rights, to have come down: while fences were mended with scraps of barbed wire or netting.

When the people were ill — as they often were; every man over fifty being crippled with rheumatism, and coughs and bronchitis rife; for the houses were at once airless and damp, many of the kitchens being below the level of the road — there came mysterious bottles of port wine, packets of tea, lengths of flannel, or a few hundredweight of coal; all of which exasperated Simpson, who could not see why the people should be patronised, ground down by low

wages and doles: given a bag of coals instead of a new roof.

"There's not six houses in the village fit for pigs; no modern North Country farmer would leave his pig in such a place. What's the good of putting a prop here and a tile there? The whole place wants rebuilding."

"It's all very well to talk," murmured Mr. Gaunt, shaking his already trembling head: — "but where's the money to come from? That's it: where's the money to come from?"

"Where does the money come from for all the slops and scraps that are tossed to them?"

"Mrs. Reannie has always been used to giving in charity," answered the old man stiffly.

"She'd do better for herself, and her people, too, if she'd pull down those places and start afresh. One wants common sense and drains, not charity. Can't you persuade her, if she doesn't like spending money, that it really would pay in the end?"

"It is n't that she does n't like spending it. She'd spend every penny she's got — sometimes I don't dare to tell her about things for fear she'll deny herself too much. She can afford to send little odds and ends to the villagers, because she does that out of her income: but she can't rebuild those houses; for I regret to say that if she did there would n't be anything left. I'm not fond of discussing my employers' affairs," he went on stiffly: — "but I am much attached to Mrs. Reannie, as I was to her father and

mother before her: and I don't like to think of her being misjudged." The old man spoke with dignity and pride. "She's a beautiful woman, a fine creature, all heart and feeling. But there it is. I lie awake at night turning it over and over in my mind: but it always ends the same. I can see no way out — excepting one," he added sadly.

"Why won't she sell the place? I made her an offer for it nearly a year ago," said Simpson. Then he added kindly: "You'd stay on with me, I hope; to see that I looked after things, fulfilled all obligations."

"You are very kind, Mr. Simpson, but I would n't expect you to consider me — why should you? Besides, I sometimes think that I'm getting beyond my work — must be getting beyond it or I could surely manage better. Anyway, I don't know if I'd have the heart to start afresh with a stranger — thanking you all the same for the kind thought. You see," he added half apologetically, "I've been with the Reannies always, and my father and grandfather before me."

"And would feel I was an outsider."

"It's not that, it's not that, indeed, Mr. Simpson —" The agent had been down to Fountains about some trifling business and Simpson was walking home across the park with him: very slowly, with many long pauses, for the old man had lost the art of walking and talking at the same time. Now they had reached the lodge gates and turning stood and gazed

down across the park, at the sweep of undulating green, the great trees, casting huge velvety shadows, for it was getting towards sunset; while below them, in its nest of growth, they could see the old grey house, dreaming beneath its veil of blue smoke.

"That's the only reason," — and he waved his arm. "It seems somehow to belong to the Reannies, to be part of them: as much — if I may be allowed a somewhat poetical simile — as the soul is part of the body. So many Reannies have lived and died there: I've a sort of feeling as though they'd rise in their graves if it was sold. But I should n't tell Mrs. Reannie that. No, no, I'm severely practical when I talk to her, poor lady." And he chuckled wisely. "For that's what it will come to, that's what it will come to. I've seen it coming for a long while back, and I believe she's beginning to realise it, too: I know she was talking to Mr. Strang about it: she'll be bound to sell, for every one's sake."

"Then I hope she'll give me the first offer."

"You may be sure of that, Mr. Simpson. You must know that we are not unmindful of all you have done for the place," replied the agent, with an air of gentle grandeur. "We are not — I speak for the family, you understand — the sort of people to allow any benefit to pass unrecognised. Mrs. Reannie spoke to me most feelingly — most feelingly, only a sennight ago — of your great generosity. And I think I may say, I feel sure I may say, that you will very shortly hear from Messrs. MacCracken and

MacCracken. For it 's got to come" — again he shook his head with an air of melancholy resignation — "yes, it 's got to come."

"I've grown fond of the place; somehow seem to belong to it," said Simpson almost boyishly.

The old agent gave him a puzzled glance. "Yes," he said, "there's something in that. You do seem to belong to it: as though it was your natural right. And you a stranger. For three years are nothing here in Little Ilkley. It 's wonderful how you 've dropped into our ways. I must confess that when I first heard that the place had been taken by a London gentleman, I was very much disturbed: anticipating all sorts of innovations and alterations. And there have been alterations, but all for the best: I will say that, Mr. Simpson, all for the best; there is no doubt about it, I only wish that Mrs. Reannie would consent to meet you herself. I feel that some arrangement might be come to, some compromise effected" — an oddly sly look came into the old man's guileless face: "Mrs. Reannie is still young."

"Yes," answered Simpson rather absent-mindedly, for he was not very interested in his landlady: "but apparently Mrs. Reannie is not very anxious to know me."

"Well, it was — you must excuse me if I mention it" — the old man's lowered tone implied his sense of a flagrant indecency — "it was — well, the fact of your having been on — you must forgive me for speaking of it — on the Stock Exchange, Mr. Simp-

son, which prejudiced us all, in the first instance, so to speak."

Simpson grinned. "Well, as a matter of fact we often mention it — feel no shame about it. I assure you, Mr. Gaunt, that there are some very honest men on the Stock Exchange."

"Doubtless, Mr. Simpson, doubtless. But we Reannies — I quite realise that we are behind the times — have never been accustomed to think so. I see my trap is waiting here, so I will wish you a very good-evening; and, believe me, that I feel that if Fountains Court must be sold, it can be in no better hands than yours. Good-night to you, sir."

"A damned narrow-minded woman!" thought Simpson, as he tramped home round by the little spinney and through the herb garden: "A damned selfish old fool! To keep all these wretched people stewing in their sties, just to feed her own silly pride: and that old fellow's as bad — 'we Reannies,' indeed! I doubt if she'll sell: I dare say she'd rather let every villager in the place die, if only she can sop her conscience with sixpennyworth of soup."

But he was wrong; for the very week after his talk with the agent he received a letter from MacCracken and MacCracken to say that Mrs. Reannie contemplated selling Fountains Court and empowered them to give him the first offer of it: at the same time mentioning the price asked.

It was an audacious sum; and in a fit of petulance Simpson wrote back declaring that he would give no

more than two thirds for the place and everything in it; then spent a miserable night thinking that he might have lost it.

But, with a promptitude which showed that things had reached a parlous state, that the owner of Fountains could not afford to wait, came the acceptance of his offer: a week or two might pass before the sale was concluded, but for all practical purposes the beloved place was his, with the very portraits in the dining-room; the plants in the borders: the tumble-down cottages: the stately trees. All — all — save for a few books which Mrs. Reannie wished for out of the morning-room shelves: and that one picture of the fair ringleted girl, who, as he learnt for the first time, was his landlady's mother, the late Mrs. Reannie.

The sudden fulfilment of his hopes left Simpson a little aghast, a little scared; with an odd feeling of disappointment. He remembered Agar Finch declaring this to be the sensation of every one who got what he wanted: that the true art of life lay in never putting out your hand to actually touch the most coveted fruit. "That is, if you happen to be one of those dust and ashes sort of people," he added. And Simpson had laughed, not feeling like one of "those sort of people."

But now for the first time he realised the truth of his friend's words. He had got what he had so long desired. Fountains was his. But what a blank came with it. Of the seven original members of the Club,

he alone remained. Poor old Desmond's place was empty forever: Kirkland might come back, but only for a flying visit: while the others had their own intimate personal life; even Finch, who seemed to avoid him as though afraid of being questioned.

Simpson thought of Van Rennen and Julie in their hut — two-roomed by now — among the pines: with all the delight of a primitive married life, full of arduous days; and of the little "Bill" to whom he was to stand as godfather. It seemed that Fountains had become overlarge, painfully empty, while for the first time he realised his own loneliness.

> "Beamy the world, but a blank all the same
> Framework that waits for a picture to frame."

He had no idea where the words came from: was not even sure that he had got them right; but remembered hearing Desmond quote something of the sort more than a year ago, and wondered what it meant.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### SIMPSON IS NOT ALTOGETHER FREE FROM DISCONTENT

THUS, by the 10th of June, Fountains Court was practically Simpson's own. All the morning he had spent riding about the village, noting the utterly hopeless cottages; and consulting with a local builder and architect, who possessed, as he had already discovered, a rare talent for doing what he was told.

The people did not want any alterations: hated the idea of being turned out of the old homes: — "Us 'ave lived 'ere close on thirty year: an' we ain't taken no 'arm," said one man, voicing the general opinion of the villagers: completely losing sight of the fact that he was a helpless cripple at fifty, while out of eleven children he had "buried eight." But that was all "the Lord's will. 'E took 'em."

But despite the futility of the arguments put forward, Simpson felt bound to respect the people's feelings: however much they hampered him. For it seemed that their tumbledown dwellings were as dear to them as Fountains was to the Reannies; and if the country had taught him nothing else, it had taught him tolerance.

At first go off he had believed that the people must be as eager for change and betterment as he himself: that they would be happy if their many causes for complaint were removed. But after a while he found that fresh sources of grievance were always at hand. A new cottage was condemned if its fireplace was put one inch nearer to the window, not leaving room for the chest of drawers which had always stood in that particular place: if the kitchen floor showed an area that took a quarter of an hour to scrub instead of ten minutes. One woman even complained that when the floor was mended she was "real put to" because there was no longer that familiar hollow where the cradle could be stood without any fear of its being rocked over; while another missed the pig-sty, being so far from the window that scraps could no longer be tipped out, and the tablecloth shaken, straight into it.

They were in terror of losing the Christmas doles, the odds and ends accorded to them when they were ill: finding no benefit in the promise of health, the proffered exchange of sanitary and water-tight houses, or even higher wages. For their minds had been so ground down to the minute, that they could realise nothing in the large; calculating life in farthings; living so completely for the needs of each day that they were unable to see beyond it.

All Simpson's hopes had revived afresh when he felt that the Fountains estate was really his: he would sink his personal loneliness in the joys of reformation.

But that first morning quenched his enthusiasm: though it did nothing to weaken his determination.

At first he thought of turning out the people: rebuilding the place, starting it all afresh. But, in the afternoon, pottering about the garden, he mellowed, grew softer.

Dividing and trimming, for the wet spring had resulted in an excess of growth, he missed a clump of Madonna lilies, which he had looked for each year: discovering them at last, in bud, but scarcely likely to flower on account of a mass of goldenrod which choked them, shutting out air and light.

He was extraordinarily glad to find the lilies still there; to see the first blooms on a little yellow Scotch rose; to encounter one old favourite after another, as he sidled his way, through the mass of bloom on the herbaceous border, to nail up a rose which, heavy with flowers, had torn itself away from the wall. And suddenly the thought came to him that the people felt the same about their little gardens: furnished with cuttings from wedding bouquets and funeral wreaths; with scraps given them by this friend or that relation: that their tumbledown cottages were as much to them — nay, a great deal more, for they were interwoven with their closest personal life, their loves and griefs — as Fountains, beautiful Fountains, aloof and dreamy, was to him.

There was only one thing for it. He must take up the task of patching and propping: submit to the incessant grumbling as the old folks' one dissipation.

And meanwhile start building afresh for the young couples: not only houses of brick and mortar, but some characteristic of sturdy independence.

Jervis brought his tea into the garden, a monster cup in which he delighted when he was alone, and a thick slice of bread and butter, that tasted of soil as he ate it; standing on the lawn at the edge of the border, without coat or waistcoat, his cup in hand, planning certain removals and additions which must be got through in the autumn.

He had grown thinner and harder in these years he had been at Fountains; and was burnt a brick red; while his clothes had lost all semblance of newness. He no longer looked like a city man masquerading as a country squire: rather wore his London clothes, the top hat and frock coat, which had once seemed as much part of himself as his skin, with an air of strangeness.

"You've grown to look positively bucolic, Simpson," Banks had complained the last time they were in Town together. But he was wrong. For the word implies a diminution of mind and soul, and in both these Simpson had gained: along with that sense of quiet which comes from a close friendship with inanimate nature.

It was half-past seven when he went in to bathe and dress ready for dinner. There had been occasions when he had sat down to this meal without changing — indeed, he never thought of donning anything more elaborate than a loose smoking-

jacket when he was alone in his London chambers. But the Reannies seemed to impose on him a sense of obligation, of family life: looking down at him from their wide gold frames with surprise and scorn if he transgressed any of the stately routine to which they were accustomed; giving him an uncomfortable feeling that he was behaving discourteously; ought to apologise.

Finch had apologised to them once, for offending their gazes with the tubular abomination of trousers: instead of the armour, the doublets and hose, the elegant silk tights, or — more modern velvet shorts, silk stockings, and buckled shoes in which they were attired. "By our legs shall ye know us," he had said: "clothed — not dressed —! parodies of humanity!"

The Early Victorian portrait had already gone, as Simpson noticed the moment that he sat down to his soup.

"A man came for it this afternoon," explained Jervis, as he poured out the sherry. "I did n't trouble you about it, sir, as you was busy. And Mrs. Bliss said as 'ow it was all right, seeing as she knew the man. I hope I did n't do wrong, sir?"

"No —" Simpson spoke doubtfully, for the absence of the picture left a blank, a feeling of emptiness in the room: gave him an odd sensation of being in disgrace. "No — you could n't have done anything else. But it leaves an ugly blank, does n't it? — eh, Jervis? We must put something else there."

"We was thinking, Mrs. Bliss and I, if you'll excuse me mentioning it, sir, that you might have some picture of your own as you'd like to have there. Some of those things you used to have in Town — it seems a sin and a shame to keep them all stored away: wasting, so to speak — or one of Mr. Finch's pictures."

"I don't think — somehow — that they would quite suit. We must think it over — perhaps we might rearrange, move the others a little."

"Perhaps so, sir. Champagne, sir."

"Why champagne?" enquired Simpson curiously, though he submitted to have his glass filled.

"We always have had champagne on the 10th, sir: Mrs. Bliss took particular pains with the dinner to-night; and there's the flowers an' all." For the first time Simpson realised that the branching candelabra were lighted, the table loaded with roses.

"We thought as 'ow it always had happened as some one had turned up that was n't exactly expected, so to speak. And seeing as there was no reason why things should n't be as nice with you alone here, sir —" the man hesitated evidently at a loss for words — crippled by unfamiliar sentiment: then added with a rush: "Anyhow, there's Mr. and Mrs. Van Rennen's little son, who 'as 'is 'ealth to be drunk: the first offspring, so to speak, of this 'ere celibates' club — Duckling, sir, an' green peas; an' asparagus to follow."

The dinner seemed very, very long, for it was evi-

dent that Mrs. Bliss had determined to honour the day. But long as it was, no uninvited guest appeared and Simpson finished it alone. As Jervis placed the dessert on the table, he bade him bring another glass and fill it with champagne.

"Now, Jervis, as we are the only two left, we will drink each other's health, and the health of all those who are absent."

Simpson rose from the table and bowed gravely with his glass in his hand. "Your very good health, Jervis: a long life and happiness. I wonder," he added rather sadly, "if you'll have gone, too, by this time next year."

"Not by the thorny path of matrimony, sir, you may rest assured of that. Your very good health, sir, and long life and prosperity."

"And now we will drink to Mr. and Mrs. Van Rennen."

"And Master Van Rennen," prompted Jervis.

"And Mr. Kirkland, who we must remember is still a member of the Club; and Mr. Gale, and Mr. and Mrs. Banks, and Mr. Parrifleet —"

"And to Miss Sartoris, sir, if I might make so bold."

"And to Miss Sartoris; and to all absent friends. Thank you, Jervis. — Yes, you may bring the coffee here, and that will be all."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### SIMPSON MEETS HIS FORMER LANDLADY FOR THE FIRST TIME

THE table had been mulcted of several leaves; but it still looked appallingly long as Simpson sat alone, gazing dreamily down its flower-laden length towards the open window, with its square of indigo, star-pierced sky; while the house seemed unnaturally still when Jervis, having placed the coffee-tray at his master's elbow, turned and left the room: so still that he could even hear the soft thud of the baize door, which led to the servants' quarters, swing to behind the man.

For a while he sat staring in front of him, stirring his coffee: then, having drunk it, he rose and taking one of the big branching candlesticks from the dining-room table moved slowly round the room; holding it high above his head: looking at each portrait in turn; trying to imagine them as rearranged in such a fashion as to nullify the loss of the one that was gone.

But something in their expression forbade the very idea of treating them as though they were inanimate objects — a "touch-me-not" air, which, without doubt, they had worn in life.

As mere pictures they were none of them of great value — excepting the lady in white satin, which, as Simpson had discovered at the valuation, was indeed a Lely. But they were all well painted, several of them by the pupils of famous men: while the originals had imparted to them an air, an individuality, which still clung: that air which constitutes the outward difference between the somebodies and nobodies of this world. For they were at once scornful and indifferent: inviolate in their pride of place. That man with slashed sleeves and flowing curls, his plumed hat in one hand, the other resting upon the hilt of his sword, — a very man despite the effeminacy of his dress, — had always hung beside the beauty in white: it would never do to shift them. The Georgian squire must remain near his behooped lady. The judge in his robes and the boy with the pony — evidently father and son — could scarcely be separated. Indeed, now he came to look at them, Simpson saw that they were all paired: excepting the young ensign with his small, closely cut whiskers, grey eyes and sensitive lips, who hung, somewhat detached from the others, next to the empty space.

And yet, what could one offer him without insult? Simpson, remembering Jervis's suggestion, ran through his own small stock of pictures; repudiating each in turn: for it was evident they belonged to these people's world as little as he himself. And with a sigh he turned and replaced the candlestick on the table, lit a cigar, and stood for a moment

thinking: wondering where the picture had been taken to, and whither the books were also gone. Finally he reached the conclusion that the easiest way of solving the question would be to go and see for himself, and leaving the dining-room he moved across the hall; found the door of the drawing-room open, and felt his way in and out among the swaddled furniture without troubling to switch on the light.

Reaching the door of the morning room he realised that it was ajar, while a dim yellow ray shone through the crack, and pushed it gently open, with the vague idea of giving the intruder, whoever he or she might be, a surprise.

The electric light had not been lit, and standing on the threshold Simpson saw that the faint radiance, which had at first attracted his attention, came from a single candle, placed on the floor in front of the bookshelves, half the contents of which were laid in a heap beside it; while a woman crouched almost double before them, flicked over the leaves of another volume. The triangular shadow of the pages, and the fingers, now long, now short, darting up and down the wall — cutting their way across the angle of the ceiling—for some moments before she replaced the book: took out another, fluttered a page or two, and added it to the pile on the floor.

For the rest, all that Simpson could see was the dark silhouette of the bent figure and head, edged with a line of light like a narrow gold thread, and rows of half-empty bookshelves.

Involuntarily he glanced across at the great octagonal window: saw that it was shut and the curtains tightly drawn. Evidently the intruder had come through the house, possibly by the connivance of one of the servants: was picking over the books, thinking he would imagine Mrs. Reannie had sent for them. Possibly the picture had been removed in the same fashion, and what could he say when the rightful owner should claim it? What he did say at that special moment, closing the door sharply behind him, was: —

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Oh!" cried the woman, and scrambled to her feet, knocking over the candle, which flickered for a moment, then went out.

For a moment or more Simpson fumbled, while he could hear her quick breath, and a soft rustle — followed by a sudden silence, as though she had made a movement to fly, and thought better of it. Then his fingers found the electric button, and the room was flooded with light: in the midst of which he stood, blinking with stupefied amazement.

The intruder was facing him: still hugging an open book to her bosom: her eyes very wide, her lips a little open, as though on the edge of fear. For the sudden ejaculation from the doorway — when she had believed herself alone — then the darkness — had been sufficiently alarming: while Simpson's second observation, when it did come, was little more enlightening than his first.

"You — you —?"

It was all he could say. The thing was too amazing. That after all his searching, all his longing and striving, there, in his morning room, browsing among his books, he should find — and greet with an expletive! — the Beatrice d'Este lady: the lady of his dreams: the woman he had thought of constantly: fitted into all that he did, his work in the present, his plans for the future: the woman for whom he had planted the deepest blue larkspur, because they matched the colour of the gown he had once seen her wear: the woman for whose sake he had grudged every flower that blossomed, because she was not there to see it: every season that passed because she was n't there to share it; the close intimacy of winter days, the outdoor freedom of the summer, the thrill of spring in the air.

"You!" he ejaculated again, drew a little nearer; and — too radiantly bewildered for any embarrassment — frankly stared.

The soft mouth closed with some severity, but the corners twitched: and for a moment there was silence.

Then their eyes met, and she gave a half-embarrassed laugh; turned her head restlessly beneath his gaze and crimsoned.

"I am so sorry: did you think I was a burglar? I owe you every sort of apology, Mr. — you are Mr. Simpson, are you not?—but I thought I would like to come and look out some books I particularly wanted."

"Take what you like, take them all," said Simpson, effusively.

"But I don't want them all."

"I 'm afraid they 're not up to much." With a desperate effort to behave naturally — the sort of effort a drunken man may make to appear sober, painfully conscious of the artificial calm, the studied correctness of movement and speech — Simpson advanced towards the books on the floor, and gazed down at them with an air of depreciation. "Do take them. I half promised my landlady that she should have what she liked from this special room — but I expect that some arrangement can be made, she seems to be a very obliging sort of person. Let me gather them together for you."

"Please don't trouble."

"It 's no trouble at all. I —" he began, and was stooping when he saw that the front of her soft black gown was grey with dust. "Oh, I say! — look at the front of your frock. And they were supposed to have spring cleaned the whole place only a month ago. Do let me —" and drawing his handkerchief from his pocket he was advancing to flick away the dust, when she repulsed him with an impatient gesture.

"What 's the good of pretending?"

"I like pretending," Simpson spoke almost doggedly: "pretending you 're really here, in my own house: though of course I know that the whole thing 's a fantastic dream."

"It is n't your house — yet."

The stranger spoke with an extraordinary air of pride, her head high; though he fancied that her lips trembled, and this time not with laughter: cursed his own stupidity, and plunging deeper, attempted a joke.

"Anyhow, it's as much my house as yours."

"It's not — it's not!"

"Now you're angry because I said that about the books being promised to my landlady. But don't think of that — you must n't think of it. Take anything you like." Simpson's candid eyes were full of anxiety, though it was evident, from the look she gave him, that the intruder suspected some hidden sarcasm.

"You are extraordinarily generous!"

"It is not generosity where you are concerned."

If she doubted his simple-mindedness as he made this assertion she must have attributed to Simpson the genius of a great actor. "As for the books, you must take what you like. I'll settle with Mrs. Reannie."

"You seem to think her extraordinarily complaisant."

"Landladies generally are, where money is concerned."

A sudden colour flamed up into the stranger's face. "Oh! this is too much!" she exclaimed; stooped towards a chair, picked up a scarf, flung it over her shoulders, — with all the air of a martial cloak, — and moved towards the door.

"What have I said now?" Simpson, who was on his knees piling the books into symmetrical heaps, scrambled to his feet.

For a moment she swung round and faced him.

"What have you said now? Do you mean to tell me that you can pretend you don't know who I am?" she demanded angrily. "Taking advantage of that pretence to — to —"

"But I don't know."

With one hand still on the handle of the door she looked him up and down: then asked with an air of exaggerated coldness, "Might I enquire why you said 'You,' like that, when you first saw me?"

"Because — well, it was — it is — you," stammered Simpson.

"All this is extraordinarily subtle: too subtle for me. Since you persist in maintaining this farce, I'd better introduce myself — I am Mrs. Reannie."

"That I swear you're not."

"Oh!" The exclamation was like a rocket shot up by the flaming indignation which crimsoned her face from chin to brow.

"But you — you —"

"You seem to have an extraordinary partiality for that pronoun, Mr. Simpson." She had regained her composure and spoke with dangerous politeness. "Will you send for Mrs. Bliss to identify me or would you prefer the police."

"You — know — I — I —"

"I'm afraid that I don't know. I suppose I'm

extraordinarily dense, but I quite fail to see why you should doubt my word. At any rate, I will get Mr. Gaunt to come himself for the books in the morning; perhaps you'll be good enough to have them ready for him. Good-evening."

"Look here, don't go; you must n't go." Simpson darted forward and caught at the edge of the door. "Of course, you thought me a perfect ass. But I swear I had no idea — never thought of it. You know one does get preconceived ideas about people, and I got an idea about Mrs. Reannie — at least about you — about her — that she was quite old, rather a stupendous sort of person. I dare say you had some kind of preconceived idea about me, if the truth were told."

"I'm afraid I never gave it a thought." The angle of the firm chin was worthy of all the Reannies, despite the assertion being a lie; but it fulfilled its purpose.

"Of course; why should I have imagined —" Simpson spoke with an air of such complete dejection that — having gained her point — she softened.

"But I think I do understand, Mr. Simpson. You imagined that Mrs. Reannie was one person, and I was another —?"

"Yes."

"A simple burglar, perhaps — one of your chance acquaintances?" There was malice in the words, but there was also humour, and the atmosphere lightened.

"I should like to tell you what I thought," ventured Simpson.

"I'm afraid I must go. And about that picture —?"

"I might have guessed. Of course, that is what it always reminded me of!"

"I hope it does n't leave a very ugly blank?" went on Mrs. Reannie, smoothly, disregarding this cryptic utterance.

"Won't you come and see? Perhaps you might suggest something — some rearrangement."

"It really is getting late: but perhaps, as I took it away —"

"It would be very kind of you," said Simpson, who had recovered a little of his usual stolidity. Then he pushed open the door and stood aside to let her pass into the drawing-room, where she put out a sure hand towards the electric light. "You don't use this room?"

"No, I don't — " he hesitated.

"You need n't mind saying you don't like it. Nobody does, excepting Mrs. Bliss, and she adores it. But somehow it was never altered, left as my mother had it at her marriage," Mrs. Reannie remarked, in a more friendly tone; then added with an air of making generous reparation, "Perhaps you will do something — now that the place really is yours."

"I don't think I shall alter anything — not yet, at any rate," said Simpson, and pushed open the door of the dining-room.

But for a moment she hung back.

"I forgot, you have friends to-night; Mrs. Bliss was preparing."

"No, I dined alone. Please go in, Mrs. Reannie," he said, and she moved forward; but once inside the door, paused, with an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, what a blank! It puts them all out of focus, breaks the continuity. I had thought that, as a mere picture, it was the least telling, the least impressive — but how one misses it. And there's my father" — she made a gesture in the direction of the young ensign — "hanging next to that empty space: now, after all these years! Oh, how could I? how could I? It must come back: that's all there is for it. I must send it back early to-morrow."

"But why? Take the other too, the one of your father if you feel that they ought n't to have been separated. As for the others they must get used to being lonely: like the rest of us," he added rather grimly.

"No, no, it belongs here."

"As you do."

"We need n't discuss that, need we?" Her voice was icy with civility.

"Of course, you hate me: hate the very thought and sight of me." Simpson's words betrayed such utter dejection that no woman could have remained untouched, either by vanity or pity.

"You are wrong there," she said gently. "I should hate you, unreasonable as it would be, if you'd just

taken the place and treated it like any dog of a place. But you — you love it nearly as much as I do: have done far more for it than I could ever afford to do," she went on generously. "Every inch of the place shows the money spent on it. And not only money," she added, as she saw Simpson wince, "but taste and thought and care. I think that should make us friends — at least make for friendship, not for hatred. And now you must let me send that picture back to-morrow, please." Her voice was almost appealing.

"You really mean it? You would rather?"

"Yes — somehow I think it would be right. That one owes something to them. You see they have always been here."

"It was deducted from the inventory," blurted out Simpson, and could have bitten his tongue off for the betrayal of his innately businesslike mind.

"You can arrange all that with Messrs. MacCracken," answered Mrs. Reannie, and was moving towards the door, when an expedient for keeping her longer flashed through his mind.

"You must let me send you back."

"Oh, but it is only a step; I 'm staying at the Rectory."

"At the Cartwrights' ! And they never told me! What treachery."

"What should they tell you? You did n't seem devoured by curiosity about your landlady," she answered with delicate malice.

"Well, there's one thing certain" — Simpson moved across the room and rang the bell. "You must have some coffee."

"But why?"

"Do you imagine I've never heard of the Rectory high tea — at six-thirty, too? Coffee, please, Jervis."

"Good-evening, Jervis."

"Good-evening, mum."

"You see, he knows me," remarked Mrs. Reannie coolly, as the man left the room. "Perhaps you'd like to send for Mrs. Bliss to testify also; though I assure you I know exactly how many tablespoonsful of coffee she'll be putting in the pot at this very moment."

"Oh, everybody knows! — about you, I mean. Always did know, I suppose — excepting me. Even Julie."

"Julie is a very dear friend of mine. She possesses a rare talent for saying a great deal and never telling anything she does n't want to." Simpson's guest moved towards the open window and stood gazing out. "Something smells lovely — is it — is it —?"

"Yes, it's the petunias in the triangular bed — a little tempered by the long strip of mignonette beneath the window, and the nicotine close against the wall. Lean forward a little and you'll get it all; with a whiff from the lime right away at the end of the lawn."

"But that's the way we always had it."

"Yes, I know; Bliss told me."

For a moment or two she stood staring out into the velvety blackness, while Simpson watched her in silence. Her frock was cut round at the neck, the line broken by a single string of pearls, her throat bare. Yes, he had been right: silhouetted thus against the dark mass of trees, the shape of her head, the whole profile was an exact reproduction of the portrait to which he had first likened her: though there was far more in the living face: a depth: a melancholy, more for the past than the present. And yet nothing quiescent or resigned: the curve of the lips, the tilt of the chin, all spoke of an ardent spirit, still aflame for life, and keenly alert for humour.

Presently she moved to the table where Jervis had placed the coffee, and poured out two cups: "Sugar — one lump or two?" She helped Simpson with a curiously homelike air: then sitting sideways, one arm on the table, her wrist raised, idly stirring her coffee, began to talk with an effect of gentle leisure, — for it seemed as if the long silence had allayed her feeling of nervous strangeness: drawn them together better than any words could have done, — discussing the garden, and the house, and the village people, laughing over their odd ways: showing amid her mirth a wistful sympathy with their needs: a deep-seated pain at the knowledge of her own helplessness: then, reverting to lighter topics, plumbing Simpson's depth of countryside knowledge.

Suddenly she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and gave a little exclamation of surprise,

"Eleven! What will the Rectory people say? They'll think I'm lost." She rose and twisted her scarf round her neck. "Good-bye, Mr. Simpson; I must thank you for your hospitality."

"I should thank you for that," answered Simpson, with his old-fashioned little bow. "If you are really in a hurry we will go out at the terrace door, and then through the walled garden and up the park: that is, if you're not afraid of the damp."

She put out her foot and turned it on one side to show the sole. "I have thick shoes: fortunately one does not dress for the Rectory evening meal. But don't you come; I think I remember the way." And she laughed.

"Of course, I shall come; that is, if you have no objection," answered Simpson; pushed open the door and followed her through the narrow hall, into the porch, where she paused.

"It's a nice place: I remember I used to have breakfast here."

"I have breakfast here, too." Simpson spoke slowly, with evident meaning. "It's glorious on sunny mornings; with the dew still on the flowers."

"Ye—s." There was a lamp hanging from one of the beams, and suddenly their eyes met beneath it: free of all antagonism, full of a curious understanding.

"Why not —?" he asked.

"We've never even been introduced to each other," protested Mrs. Reannie.

"Oh, but we have."

"I introduced myself; that does n't count: nobody introduced you. I've been sitting in your dining-room, drinking coffee with you till eleven o'clock at night. And now, actually, to cap it all, I believe you contemplate asking me to breakfast." Her lips quivered, an unexpected dimple showed in one cheek.

"Will you come?" asked Simpson, with the sudden audacious bravery of a shy man.

"What would Mrs. Cartwright say?"

"Hang Mrs. Cartwright. Do, *do*. There may never be another day."

"There will be plenty of days: close on two hundred in this year alone."

"I can scarcely believe there will ever be another — at least, not like this. Then there's the picture, you must see it hung."

"It won't be here."

"Oh, yes, it will, if I send to the Rectory for it."

"I *would* like to see how it looks!" Her voice sounded so like capitulation that Simpson broke in, with perhaps a trifle too much insistence.

"You must see it by a good light!"

"There are some sixteen hours of good light in a June day; no need to rise with the dawn."

Mrs. Reannie's voice showed such decision, while she branched off to other subjects with such palpable deliberation that Simpson did not dare to protest. And thus he was all the more amazed — know-

ing very little of women — when, having wished him good-bye at the Rectory Gate, and actually turned to go up the path, she reverted to the subject: over her shoulder like any one of the villagers, picking it up with an air as though it had never been dropped.

"Then if you really can send for the picture, and it's nice and fine — it does seem a pity to lose any of the daylight — I'll come and beg you for another cup of Mrs. Bliss's coffee. About nine, — eh, — will that do? — Good-night, Mr. Simpson."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### SIMPSON BOOKS A MOST IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENT

SIMPSON was generally an easy master. "Too easy," said Banks, whose idea of household management was to impel forward the domestic machinery by a constant series of explosions, as though it were a species of motor engine. But that night, late as it was, he insisted on interviewing Mrs. Bliss, who appeared with her decorous black gown somewhat gapingly arranged over a garish pink flannelette nightgown: one forgotten curling-pin dangling at the nape of her neck, a large metal affair which Simpson imagined might be some species of mousetrap.

But for all that, her dignity never faltered: was, indeed, stiffened by something very near to temper, till she heard the name of the expected guest; when she was ready with a menu sufficient to feed twenty women: even bustled off to the dairy herself to set more milk for cream: promising to see that Bliss gathered all the early strawberries, the first thing next morning, along with the freshest roses, to arrange that a man should be sent precisely at eight-thirty — Simpson cunningly arranged this as a species of reminder — to the Rectory for the picture, while Clarke rode into Market Charlford to see if any fresh fish were procurable.

Simpson was too single-minded to feel the least shame over his ardour of preparation. Nothing mattered excepting the woman for whom it was being made. The only thing which he could not make sure of was the weather, and the next day saw him up at five o'clock surveying the misty morning with some doubt.

Out in the garden, even as late as seven-thirty, Bliss was of the opinion that "it might rain, though again it might n't."

But in another hour all his fears were at rest, for the last layer of mist floated away from the tops of the trees; the sun blazed out, and the table was set in the porch with silver and fruit, cream and preserves; awaiting only the final touch of hot viands, the fish, the freshly baked rolls, the eggs and coffee, — when Simpson grew dissatisfied with the bowl of roses which decorated the centre — crimson when he had a fancy for yellow — and went off and cut more; started to arrange them on the table, and upset the water over the cloth, which Jervis changed in stony silence; while his master squatted on the step, adding rose after rose to the already tightly jammed bouquet, without any apparent improvement: his whole being intent on listening for the front doorbell, his fingers impervious to thorns: so busily engaged that he failed to hear the rustle of a muslin dress between the box borders of the Italian garden; and jumped, as though discovered in the committal of some crime, when a cool voice remarked: —

"It's as cruelly overcrowded as a Russian prison": and turned to find that Mrs. Reannie was standing close behind him; all in white, without a hat, and with a parasol — the exact shade of the well-remembered blue cloak — tilted over one shoulder.

"Please leave them alone; it's absolute barbarity!" She closed the parasol, dropped to her knees at Simpson's side, and drew off her gloves.

"My hands don't seem made for this sort of thing," he answered dolefully, eyeing her long, cool, white fingers; both oblivious of the fact that they had not even wished each other good-morning.

"I think — on the whole — I'm glad they're not," answered Mrs. Reannie, drawing out the roses one by one and laying them on the stones at the side of the bowl: "though perhaps there's no necessity for them to be quite so gory: they look as though you had literally fought your way through a wall of thorns instead of trying to arrange a medium-sized vase full. Suppose you go and wash them, while I finish these."

When Simpson returned, the roses were in the middle of the table; each blossom standing distinct and perkily upright, in a fashion that he had pictured but totally failed to achieve.

"It's really quite simple — only it's not men's work, you see," explained his guest airily: at once putting him in his place and augmenting his wonder; while it was not till months later, when he found her propping flowers up with little stones, that he gauged

the pretentious cunning of even the best of women: forcing from her the admission that she had sent Jervis flying off to the nearest border.

She had thrust the surplus flowers into her belt, and was sitting calmly at the table as Simpson emerged from the house, followed by the man with a steaming tray-load.

"Shall I stay here — is this right?"

"Of course, and will you pour out? I took you at your word as you said you liked Mrs. Bliss's coffee. But we can have tea in a moment if you like; she generally sends it up when we have visitors."

"Oh, but she knows I always take coffee," responded Mrs. Reannie placidly, handing him his cup; while he mentally blessed the housekeeper as a bond of union.

The picture had arrived, and after breakfast they went into the dining-room and saw it hung: — "Now I hope you'll be happy," said Mrs. Reannie addressing the whiskered ensign, with the faintest hint of reproach in her voice. After this they strolled about the Italian garden, in and out of the beds: through the stables; down to the kitchen garden to see if there were any more strawberries: and up and down every path, along every border of the walled garden, while Mrs. Reannie sought out her well-remembered favourites: all with a complete disregard of time.

It is true that once or twice she exclaimed: "I must get back; what will Mr. Cartwright say?"

But excepting for a rather joyous feeling of youth-

fully doing what they ought not to do, this speculation did not seem to affect either of them in the very least.

There is, perhaps, one such day in every one's life. It is seldom more — when the whole world seems to hang in a nebulous light; when nothing is quite real, or quite certain; when the entire universe might be a bubble to break with touching; when one is beyond one's body, all pure soul; when everything — even the birds in their bursts of song and sudden silences, the flowers, the clouds — conspires for perfection. Such moments come only when one human spirit first touches another: and vanish, or at least are transmuted, with the first kiss, the first spoken word, of love.

> "This flower she stopped at, finger on lip,
> Stooped over in doubt, as settling its claims;
> Till she gave me, with pride to make no slip,
> The soft meandering Spanish name" —

quoted Simpson, as they lingered over the long border of iris beneath the east wall.

"That's Browning's 'Garden Fancies,' is n't it? What a curious mixture you are — they used to grow irises for the sake of the roots; even in my grandmother's time they never thought of buying such a thing as orris root for the potpourri — somehow one does n't expect business men to study Browning."

"That's because you have a preconceived notion of business men, chiefly founded on Dickens, I ex-

pect, if the truth were known. As for stock-brokers, Gaunt has told me of your mortal antipathy — Look at that cloth-of-gold, is n't it splendidly extravagant?"

"Mr. Gaunt must have judged me by himself. He regards the City, and all connected with it, as one great, conglomerate, ravening wolf. — The lavender is getting too leggy, you 'll want to strike some fresh cuttings."

What did they talk of? Their conversation was extraordinarily detached — half the sentences finding no end — irrelevant and intimate. He told her that she ought to have been christened Beatrice, and she replied — without asking "Why?" — that she actually had been: Margaret Beatrice Stella, which accounted for the M. B. S. of her signature, but that she was always called Stella: while as for him, he told her how old he was, and the date of his birthday; and what Parrifleet had said — to which she replied that she had met Parrifleet and loved him — and about his mother, and the first trout he ever caught: all the sort of things that a man inevitably does tell to the one woman: while the sunny hours rolled by, so completely unrelated to time that they might have represented a moment or an eternity.

At last, a little tired, she stopped by the seat beneath the chestnut tree. "Five minutes' rest, then I really must go," she declared with the decision of a person who feels some secret doubt.

"You've only just come," complained Simpson dolefully; "and there are heaps of things I want to discuss — business matters, for instance. Then, if I've really got the place, if it's really mine, I may live here alone for forty years: another hour or two won't hurt you; you'd spend that talking to any poor old man in the village."

"You're not very old —"

"You ought to know; I've told you."

"And not in the least to be pitied," she went on, disregarding the interruption. "As for being lonely, that's your own fault."

"I like that! When all the fellows have deserted me, — my own fault, indeed!"

"They were quite right: the idea of founding a Society, a Club — anything — on a negative! It seems to me" — she spoke with emphatic softness, their desultory talk suddenly crystallising to something more definite — "that not doing what one doesn't want to do could be managed without an institution of any sort. To bind yourselves together to do something — that's a different thing altogether. To climb and climb: to heed no fall, acknowledge no defeat: that seems to me worth doing, filling one's veins with the wine of life. But the skim milk of negation: pheugh!" she gave a little gesture of gallant scorn. "Determining *not* to do: I would n't give that for it" — and she snapped her fingers. "To really want anything, to wear out one's life in the endeavour for it — however vain: that's worth while."

"But suppose a man knows that what he wants is quite beyond his reach. It will make life pretty hard if he lays everything on it, and then finds that it's been all in vain."

"I was wrong to use that word. I don't believe it ever is in vain, unless the will or the desire ceases. Oh! believe me, I was wrong to say that." In her eagerness she put out one hand and lightly touched him on the breast. "You now, for instance — you and those other men — what did you come to Fountains for? — Not to do anything which you felt must be done: not to accomplish any work, here in this quiet place, where your thoughts might be all your own: not to perfect any discovery, or invention, however small. But just *not* to do. What does it amount to — when all's said and done — merely a running-away from life."

"Perhaps in the beginning. But afterwards — the others —"

"They did n't run fast enough —" she gave a little laugh of scorn. "They were like Lot's wife looking back. Poor things; even their negations were invertebrate. And now you —"

"I'm left alone: the symbol of a failure, you mean?"

"Well —"

"You're right in one way. It is evident enough that I am left. But in another way you're wrong. For I am more completely left by the negative becoming a positive than by anything else."

"How do you mean?" Mrs. Reannie was digging holes in the ground with the point of her parasol, then painstakingly smoothing them over again.

"Well, I began by *not* wanting to marry any woman — the day I decided to take the place. And ended, that same day, by determining to marry one particular woman, or no other."

"And yet you're still alone." There was a hint of mockery in her voice.

"That is scarcely my fault. My star rose, and then vanished for three whole years, though I've swept the heavens for it ever since: never forgotten, never quite despaired: planted all those blue things along the border there because of a cloak she was wearing that one night."

"And you've never seen her since?" Stella's voice was very gentle — a mere breath.

"Yes — quite lately — twice."

"Does she know?"

"It's scarcely likely, unless she's gifted with second-sight."

"Why have n't you told her?"

"How can one tell a woman a thing like that, when one has only seen her three times?"

"There now! what did I say! Fear comes in — of course, you'll lose her." Mrs. Reannie's tone showed exasperation and foreboding. "Or perhaps you don't think it worth troubling about, after all. I wonder how the things of this world are ever done by men; it was they who invented the word 'resigna-

tion,' which with them means howling for the moon and making no effort to reach it."

"What could I do?" Simpson asked the question meekly enough; while that exhilarated feeling that possesses a small boy when he sees a bird actually hopping towards a limed twig possessed him. The whole thing was so fantastic, delightful: though at the same time rather terrifying.

"What could I do?" he repeated: "tell me that."

"What could you do? Oh, if I was a man and loved a woman," — she had swung to her feet and stood facing him, her eyes aglow — "I would n't care what she thought or felt. I'd make her think and feel as I wanted her to — try my will against hers; take her, and hold her. Yet you go placidly on as if life was an endless succession of years, and another three or so did n't count."

"Supposing" — Simpson had risen, too, and was standing before her, rather stolidly, his hands deep in his pockets, to keep them from the danger of taking her at her word: his feet wide apart, to make quite sure that he was standing upon the ground, not merely floating in space — "supposing that I —"

"Supposing — supposing," she mocked: looked up in the tree, frowned at the sun which came dappling through the leaves, and opened her parasol with a great air of decision. "Supposing I go home; by the look of things it must be nearly lunch-time."

Simpson drew one hand from his pocket and touched her wrist, almost with an air of command.

"Shut that thing up and sit down for a minute. Now we've started this, you must see me through — tell me what I am to do."

"You really care for her?"

"Yes — I really care." Simpson smiled, *care* seemed such an inadequate word.

"Now, how like a man that is! You know you care, but you never stop to think that she may care just as much. Ah!" — and she gave a little gesture of impatience: — "you men! If you are cads, you think every woman cares. If you are nice, you think that the only woman cannot possibly care. Perhaps she has thought of you — all this time in the same way that you've thought of her."

"My dear lady, she does n't even know me."

"Well, now you have found out where she is, make it your business to see that she does know you. Have done with negatives once and for all. Take up all the light between her and the rest of the world. Tell her you intend to marry her, whether she likes it or not. That's what I would do if I was a man." Stella gave a spirited toss of her head, a swinging buccaneering movement of the shoulders oddly at variance with the soft femininity of her appearance: a movement that would have reminded Parrifleet of her assertion that she had been a sailor in some preëxistence. "I believe that's why women thought so much of men in the old days. They did n't ask: they took for granted."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course, I mean it."

"Then, Mrs. Reannie, I have the honour to inform you" — Simpson took out his notebook and fluttered over the pages: with an effort at calmness which resulted in an air of such businesslike stolidity that he might have been arranging some deal, the outcome of which did not matter much one way or the other — "that three months from this date — the 11th of June, that will be the 11th of September — I intend to marry you in Little Ilkley Church at twelve precisely. I do think morning weddings are really so much nicer, don't you?" he added blandly: "and it will be very quiet, please, probably only you and I, and the parson."

Stella flushed crimson: treated him to a hard stare: hesitated a moment, biting her lip; finally clapped her hands and laughed: — "Well done! — Well done!"

"And — if there's no particular reason against it —" he went on, ignoring her interruption, "I'd like you to wear blue: you can choose the material for yourself. And, by the bye, I might as well tell you that my Christian name's George."

He had spoken in detached sentences, apparently engrossed by the entry he was making in his book. But now he shut it, replaced the pencil, carefully adjusted the elastic band — placed it in his pocket: looked up at Stella smiling, though his face was noticeably white, and repeated: — "George."

"As if it mattered to me." Mrs. Reannie's head was still high, but her lips trembled — between laughter and something else.

"I don't suppose it does, any old name will do," he responded airily: "only I must tell you I object to Georgie. Well, that's settled, eh? September the 11th, I won't let you forget. And now for lunch, *our* lunch, in *our* house."

"I'm not — I —"

"But you are — what did you tell me about being half-hearted, about doubting?"

Stella turned and faced him fairly, white to the lips as he was; while in both there was that look which one sees in the eyes of men who are fencing: wary, intensely watchful, rather hard and anxious. For there is an odd moment in all courtship, however happy, when the sex antagonism, the fighting instinct is roused. But she laughed bravely, though on a higher note than usual.

"Well done, well done, indeed! I was fairly caught: give in: cry a truce. But now I must go. The Rectory high feast is at one as you know. Good-bye, Mr. Simpson." She tilted the blue parasol forward over her head and held out one hand. "For a beginning it was really excellent: — accept my congratulations. If you are as good in the real as in the counterfeit, you may win. Now good-bye, and good-luck."

Simpson caught the proffered hand and held it. "Not so fast — you taught me my lesson; I'm an apt pupil and I'll not give in so easily," he said, hearing his own voice rather higher pitched than usual, blatantly confident; listening to it as though

it belonged to some one else, and he, George Simpson was standing on one side, waiting while this other self rushed to its ruin.

"This is going too far. I acknowledge that I had no business to dictate. But I was half in fun, talking at random. You had a right to retaliate, laugh at me. But now — let me go. You have had your revenge — you —"

She hesitated, her eyes filled with tears, at the sight of which Simpson suddenly toppled from the high wave of exhilaration, onto which his excitement had swept him.

"My dear, my dear," — he dropped her hand, and drew back a little. "Look here, I know you must think me a cad, an unutterable cad! But I'm not such a cad, such a fool as that: to laugh at you — you! When I'm not fit to as much as kiss the hem of that white gown of yours! What an ass I've been. But somehow it all went to my head. Last night, and this wonderful morning — and June — all coming together when everything seemed to be at an end. The very fact of finding you here — here of all places — after hunting England for you!"

"For me —?"

"Well, who else? Good God! to think of the times I've been to that fool theatre — imagining that as you'd been there once you might go again. And now to have spoilt it all." Suddenly he was in the depth of despair, convinced that he must have been in-

sane to have ever hoped: oppressed by a horrible mental caricature of himself.

Mrs. Reannie's parasol was lowered to an angle which completely hid her face. In his normal state Simpson might have gathered some encouragement from the fact that she had sat down again; but to his distorted fancy it gave her the aspect of a judge; though, as a matter of fact, it neither meant acquiescence nor condemnation; was merely the outcome of the undignified fact that she trembled so she could no longer stand.

"Perhaps if you only knew — realised —" he went on disconsolately, for there is no encouragement to be gathered from a tightly stretched surface of corn-flower-blue silk — "how I have thought of you, you would understand why I made such an ass of myself: would say: 'Poor devil, he's only an unfortunate bounder of a City man, he did n't know any better': even Gaunt would understand that," he added bitterly.

The parasol was lowered and closed. Mrs. Reannie rose with a definite air. "I don't think you need say those sort of things about yourself. I don't feel" — she spoke with enigmatical softness — "that there is any special need to make excuses for you. I quite understand — it has all been a mistake —"

"In the manner, not in the matter," interjected Simpson. "If I'd only had patience, waited a little. But you know there was something — a feeling of ridiculous youth in the air."

"It's always like that at Fountains in the spring and early summer. Later it settles down with a sort of sigh; but up to the end of June it seems all alive with quiet promise, just waiting." Mrs. Reannie's voice was meditative: she seemed to have half forgotten both Simpson and his sins.

"You feel that, too? I wonder if it's in us, or in the place."

"I think it's the place. There's nowhere in the world like it, and I seem to have been almost everywhere since I left. I was in Cashmir half the winter, almost hating its loveliness."

With the odd freemasonry which had affected them both from the beginning, they suddenly drifted away from all the storm and stress of the last twenty minutes; the thought of each following the desultory wanderings of the other in a fashion that is significant of love.

"I was travelling with a friend who paid all the expenses," she went on. "That was horrid to begin with; it used to make me hot all over when she haggled about the hotel bills. I was n't happy; and when our little world goes wrong, beauty only makes it all the harder to bear. We were away nearly eight months altogether."

"No wonder I could n't find you."

"But I've been home more than a year. Last June I was here, when you had your last dinner; I saw one of your members in the church — Mr. Gale I think it was Julie said."

"And she knew you all the time! Think of a whole year wasted! And now what am I to do here? It's yours — more, part of you. Nothing can ever buy it. I guessed that there was something lacking before: now I know what it is; it'll be unendurable. That's why it always seemed to stand a little aloof for all its friendliness. It knows I don't belong here; every tree in the park knows it. I'm all out of it: they'd draw aside their leaves when I pass them — if they only could. It's a snob of a place! No — no, it is n't, only cruelly faithful. And now what am I to do?"

He looked at her smiling; though his blue eyes held the wistful blankness of a child, who is suddenly overcome by the fear that his longed-for prize packet may prove empty. "Of course, you never could — a nobody from off the Stock Exchange: forty-five: bald: fat — though, thank God, not so fat as he was. And you and Fountains! It's too utterly incongruous." And he laughed rather drearily.

"Do you remember what I told you?"

"What?"

"To take things, some things, for granted." She had been moving slowly across the lawn in the direction of the walled garden as Simpson spoke, following like a whipped cur at her heels. Now she reached the door and stood with her back turned, fumbling at the latch.

"Well, it seems to me that you're taking it for granted — all one way." Her voice was unnaturally detached, as though the whole affair was one of absolutely no moment.

Then as the door opened, leaving her backed by the straight turfed path, the borders of flowers, the ridiculous fountains, — that they had set going only an hour earlier, — she turned and spoke quickly, rather breathlessly, as if with a great effort of bravery.

"It's just as I said. You know what you feel; you don't think what I feel. Do you really imagine that I did n't see you that night; that I did n't know? Do you think that any one person can look at, feel for another as you looked at, felt for me, without its being mutual? There would n't be a spark. If there were, it would fizzle out in a moment. It lived because we both knew — you did n't know I was your landlady, I did n't know you were my tenant: we were hampered by none of the silly explanations with which the world labels us — we knew more than that, things that there is no explaining. I believe it must be as Mr. Parrifleet says, the repetition of what has happened over and over again. To come like that — to know — without any reason — to know at once, as we knew."

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew! Do you remember, just before you left the box you turned? I knew you would turn — I waited on purpose. . . . There now, you know the worst."

"You mean —?" It seemed to Simpson as if the whole world swam round him while he stood stolidly in the midst of it, amazed out of all articulation.

Mrs. Reannie gave a shrug, though her eyes were

soft, her lips trembling between tears and laughter. "But they say you made a fortune on the Stock Exchange! It must have been easy, any one could do it."

"Why — Stella!"

"Because you're the densest person I ever met — because — oh, good-bye."

She turned, was half through the door: would have slammed it in his face, had he not suddenly forgotten his disabilities: felt only that he was a man: remembered that she was the one woman in the world, and caught her in his arms.

A few minutes later, as they sat on the stone coping at the edge of the pond, utterly regardless of the Rectory dinner hour, a thought occurred to him.

"If you knew — all the time, that it was 'you,' why did you pretend?"

She drew back and looked at him meaningly, without a word, her eyes dancing with mischief.

"A great lady like you," remarked Simpson disapprovingly.

"Oh, my dear, that's just it. Great ladies get tired of being great ladies. They like — just for a change, and the greater ladies they are the better they like it — to be mere minxes for a while: a quaint fact, but one which accounts for much which is otherwise inexplicable."

THE END

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